

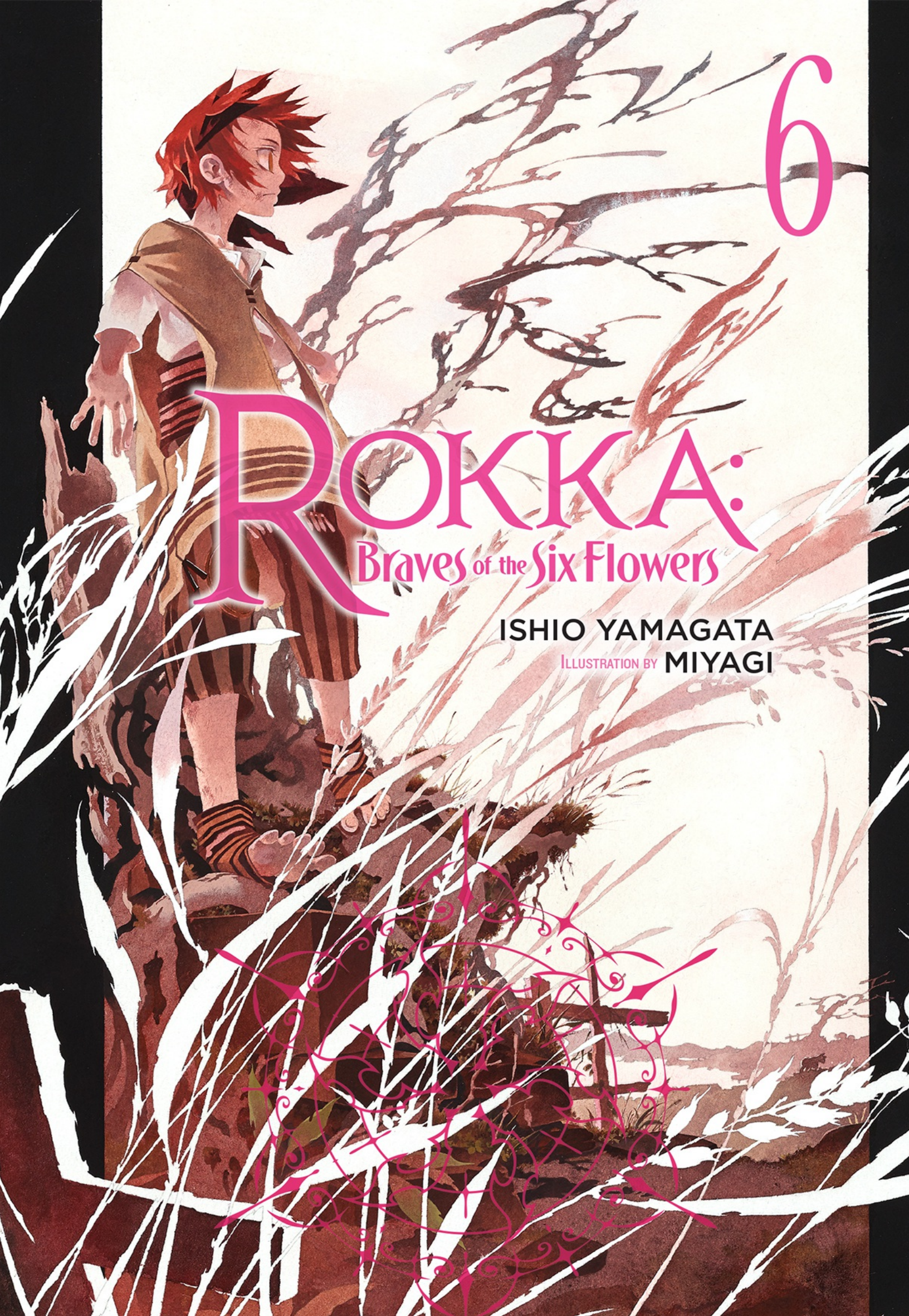
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ROKKA:

Braves of the Six Flowers

ISHIO YAMAGATA

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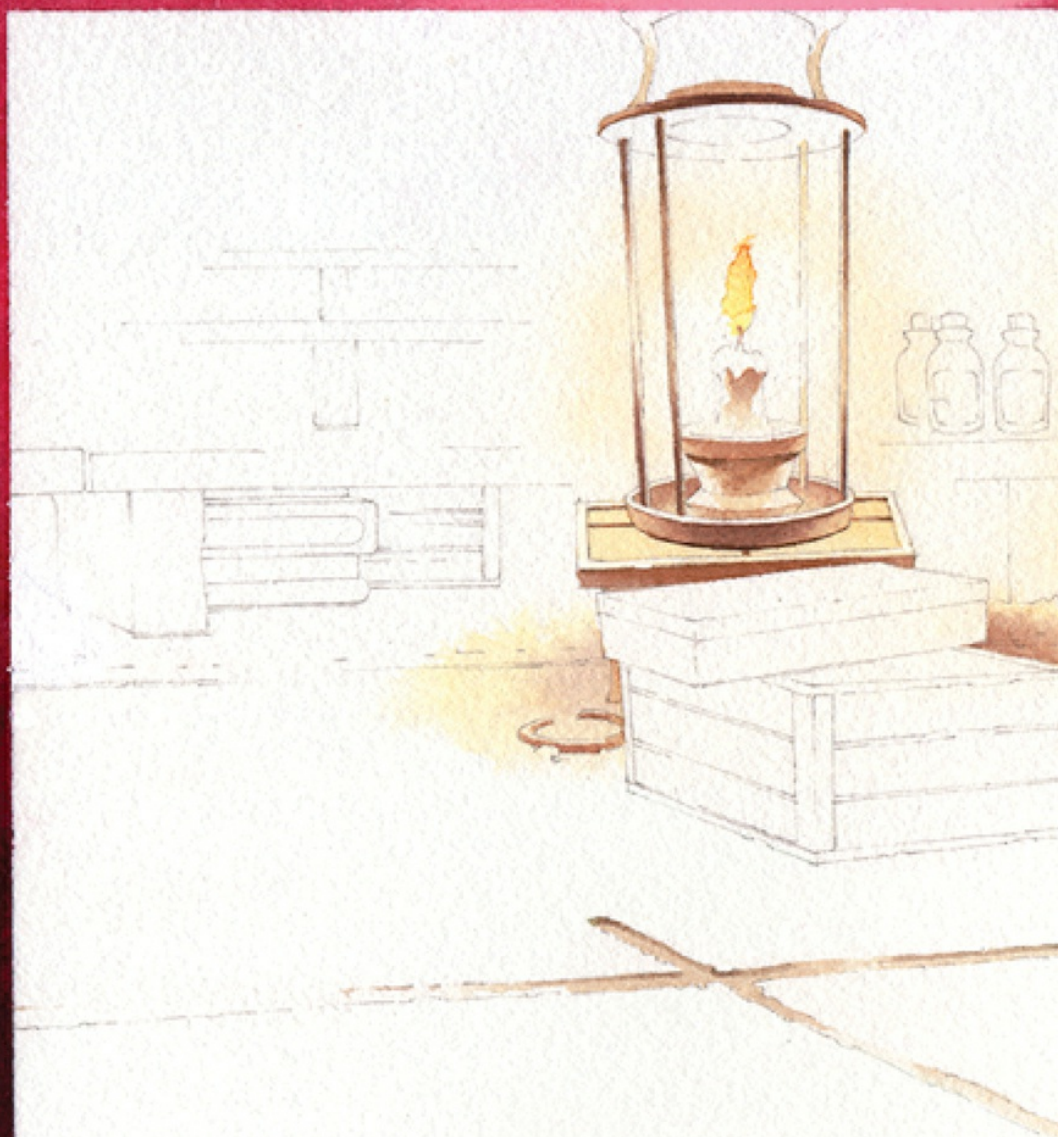
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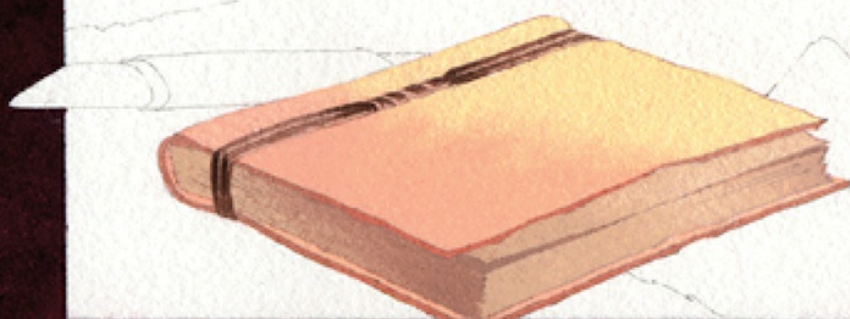
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Illustration / MIYAGI





That is why I have chosen Adlet Mayer.



ROKKA:

Braves of the Six Flowers

6

ISHIO YAMAGATA

ILLUSTRATION BY
MIYAGI



NEW YORK

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Rokka: Braves of the Six Flowers, Vol. 6

Ishio Yamagata

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CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue : Avenger](#)

[Chapter 1 : Schemes](#)

[Chapter 2 : Hostage](#)

[Chapter 3 : Hans Humpty's Lies](#)

[Chapter 4 : The Suffering of Those Who Love](#)

[Chapter 5 : Resistance](#)

[Chapter 6 : Love's Conclusion](#)

[Epilogue : Those Freed](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

Adlet



Fremy



Rolonia



Mora





Nashetania



Goldof



Chamo



Hans



◆ THE EVENTS THUS FAR ◆

When the Evil God awakened from the depths of darkness, the Spirit of Fate chose six Braves and bestowed upon them the power to save humanity. The self-proclaimed "strongest man in the world," a boy named Adlet, was chosen as one of these Braves of the Six Flowers and headed out to battle to prevent the resurrection of the Evil God.

But when the Braves gathered to meet at the designated location, they found that, for some reason, there were seven of them. The Braves, realizing that one among them was the enemy, fell prey to suspicion and paranoia. However, with Adlet's leadership, their wits, and the powers of the Saints in their party, they've slowly but surely solved these mysteries.

The true nature of the fiend commander Tgurneu's scheme, a hieroform called the Black Barrenbloom, has been revealed, and it's brought about a clash of opinions among the Braves, leading to the group splitting ways.

Meanwhile, Tgurneu's forces draw near...



Illustration: Miyagi

A black and white illustration of a gnarled tree branch with a full moon and a decorative circular frame containing the title.

Prologue
Avenger

Prologue

Avenger

“I don’t have the time to bother with trash like you, Adlet.”

Fourteen-year-old Adlet bit his lip at Atreau Spiker’s cruel assessment.

“Just be our servant instead,” the elder apprentice suggested. Adlet ignored him and his condescending tone. “I’ll get your revenge. I’m way stronger than you.” A hint of scorn was etched on his face.

Four years had passed since Adlet was first apprenticed to Atreau, and he was the worst of all Atreau’s students. None of his skills were remotely up to par—not his sword, not his throwing needles, not the cleverness needed to make use of Atreau’s secret tools.

With rage burning in his heart after his hometown’s destruction, Adlet had tried and tried. He’d sworn he would devote everything to vengeance, but no matter how he poured himself into the attempt, he couldn’t improve.

At this point in time, Adlet was anything but the “strongest in the world.”

But even as miserable as he was, there was someone who was kind to him—another boy the same age, who had become an apprentice a little while after him. He scolded Adlet for always being so reckless in his training, and when Adlet got hurt, the boy treated his wounds.

One day, he handed Adlet a letter in the training field. “Hey, Adlet. You should leave.”

Adlet didn’t even look at the letter, instead focusing entirely on swinging his wooden sword.

“Becoming a Brave of the Six Flowers is impossible for you. You must know that, right? Give up already. Focus on your own happiness instead.”

“Shut up, or I’ll kill you.”

The boy pushed the letter at Adlet one more time. “A cousin of mine is a peddler. Says he wants to help you. I sent him a letter asking if he would get

you some work, and he agreed. Work with him. Make new friends and start a new family. It'll be way more fun than staying here."

Adlet yelled and swiped at the boy with his sword, fully intending to beat him to death. He'd made up his mind to kill anyone who interfered with his revenge.

But even though Adlet's swing was at full strength, his fellow student avoided it easily. Before Adlet could lash out again, the boy kicked Adlet in the stomach and sent him tumbling to the ground. "...You meant to kill me? Your only friend?" The boy looked down at Adlet disdainfully. "Atreau told me that's why you're so hopeless."

Adlet tried to stand, but his legs were too weak.

"Without your lust for vengeance, you're empty. You can't get strong like that. You'll never find true strength if there's nothing you want to protect. No one matters to you—not even yourself. Someone like you can never become the strongest in the world."

The accusation pierced Adlet's heart.

"I've really had it with you. Just throw yourself into your pointless mission until you die," the boy said, then walked away. He never spoke to Adlet again.

Atreau claimed that those who valued nothing couldn't become strong. But the day Adlet's village had been destroyed, his heart had been shattered. All the people he'd loved were now gone. Everything he'd wanted to protect had been lost. And that sense of loss prevailed over everything else in his heart.

When he was about to start a new friendship, Rainer would appear in his mind and say *Will you forget me?* And before he could show kindness to anyone, Schetra would turn up to stop him. Nothing mattered to him except the dead. He couldn't love anyone else. Any consideration for another felt unnecessary, an obstacle to his revenge.

Everyone he saw was an enemy. His life was only for killing. When people spoke kindly or compassionately to him, their words never reached his heart. He knew he would never get any stronger at this rate, but he couldn't control the flames of vengeance that burned in his heart.

Then one night, he had a dream.

In it, he met someone and fell in love. He reached out to her and started running, trying to embrace her. But his fingers never reached her.

He was surprised at himself. He'd believed his humanity was long gone from his heart—that he was a monster incapable of anything but killing and hate. But now, he loved someone.

Still unable to embrace her, Adlet opened his eyes. He was lying in a corner of the cave, gazing up at the morning sun in a bleary daze.

Usually, he would forget dreams immediately, but mysteriously, this one left a deep impression on Adlet's heart. His failure to touch her saddened him. "...Damn it."

I don't have the time to be thinking about some dream, he thought, getting up. He rushed through his morning wash, grabbed his wooden sword, and began doing practice swings. He couldn't forget that three-winged fiend if he tried. Fantasizing about the day he would slice it to pieces, remembering his friend Rainer and his sister, Schetra, bearing their regret and suffering on his shoulders, Adlet brought the weapon down over and over and over.

But that girl from his dream drifted through the back of his mind. He found himself recalling the loneliness of reaching out only to find her out of reach. The thoughts were chasing Rainer and Schetra from his mind.

"...What the hell? I can't believe this," Adlet muttered quietly. "I still have human feelings?"

Adlet realized then that it was impossible for humans to dedicate everything to revenge and bury their hearts in hatred alone. You just couldn't stop yourself from falling in love with someone.

From that day forward, Adlet began changing, bit by bit.

He started talking with other apprentices. He could be grateful for their kindnesses again. He could see the importance of lifting others up and being lifted up, however slightly. His scowl gradually softened, and his impenetrable heart was opening.

And most surprising of all, his training began showing distinct results. He was still far from catching up to the other apprentices, but still, change was change.

“I suppose you’ve improved somewhat,” Atreau commented upon seeing Adlet’s progress. It was the first time Atreau had ever praised him. “Don’t ever forget the desire to protect someone, to keep from losing them. But...you’re still hopeless trash. Barely human. If you fail to show me results, you will be leaving regardless.”

Atreau was still harsh.

About three months after Adlet’s dream of a stranger, he sat in a cave, holding a stake.

Atreau had told him this was one of the secret tools he’d developed himself. Since the tool was still incomplete, it had yet to be named. But Atreau told Adlet it was sure to be his greatest masterpiece.

This weapon made use of Saint’s blood. Atreau had created a pure extract of the element poisonous to fiends, crystallized it, then fitted that crystal onto the tip of a stake. According to him, this weapon would have the power to kill any fiend without fail.

“Find a way to make practical use of this tool, Adlet,” Atreau had ordered while handing him the stake. “Something no one would ever think of. Figure out a new way to deploy it that no fiend could imagine—no matter how intelligent. You must accomplish this, or you’ll never be able to surprise the fiends, and there would be no value in chronicling your efforts in my research.

“This is a test for you as well. You must shock me with your idea, or I’ll drive you off this mountain. A stupid boy could never master my secret tools.”

With the stake before him, Adlet racked his brain. He really would be expelled if he couldn’t surprise Atreau. Atreau was not a coddling man—in fact, it was baffling Adlet hadn’t been kicked out already.

If Adlet was to leave the mountain now, then his dream of being the strongest in the world would end. He would never get his revenge. He’d never avenge Rainer, Schetra, or the rest of his village.

Once again, Adlet had a strange premonition about the girl in his dream three months earlier. He had to become the strongest, or he wouldn’t be able to keep her safe. He needed to reach that goal, for her sake. He had no basis for this

feeling—no logical reason. That girl was nothing more than a figment of a dream. But for him, that was enough. Even if she was just in his mind, she became his reason to fight for his goal.

He never wanted to lose her again, and that determination made him stronger.

“...I’m not gonna let myself get kicked out over this,” Adlet muttered to himself. “I *will* get revenge for Schetra and Rainer. And...I’ll protect that girl when I meet her someday. And if I want to do any of it, I have to become the strongest man in the world.”

Adlet stared at the stake for a while before closing his eyes and bracing himself.

Then he flipped it in his grasp to pierce his own heart.

Chapter 1
Schemes

Chapter 1

Schemes

It was late at night on the eighteenth day since the Evil God's revival. In the central-northern area of the Howling Vilelands, deep within the Fainting Mountains, a single fiend stood on the roof of the Temple of Fate. It was a wolf-fiend with tentacles growing from its back. In its mouth, it carried a fig sprouting long vines. Tgurneu was currently using this wolf-fiend as its body.

Tgurneu looked down upon the forest thundering with the march of over eight hundred fiends, an army pursuing the Braves of the Six Flowers. From the signs at the temple, it could tell they had not run far.

"Repörting!" A bird-fiend swooped down from the sky to alight near Tgurneu. It was specialist number two, that served as both Tgurneu's messenger and scout, one of the few fiends that knew all of Tgurneu's plans. "The Six Braves have split into two groups, both in flight: Häns and Chamo to the north—and the rémaining Braves with Dozzu and Nashetania to the wëst. The Black Barrenbloom is säfe and sound, and there is no sign the sevénth has been éxposed, either!"

Upon hearing the report, Tgurneu gave a deep nod. "See, number two? The plan has proceeded just as I said, hasn't it? Fremy is sure to survive, and the seventh will remain unknown."

"...I was foolish. I am in awe of your keen insight, Cómmander."

"You didn't believe in the power of love—and you must, if you want to know whom the battle will favor," Tgurneu said with a smile.

The previous afternoon, they'd received a report that the Braves of the Six Flowers, along with Dozzu and Nashetania, were headed to the Temple of Fate. Number two had feared that if the Braves made it to the Temple of Fate, the power of the Black Barrenbloom would be revealed or the Braves might even discover it was Fremy.

But Tgurneu hadn't been upset at all—not because it had placed its faith in number nine guarding the temple or the enigma of Fremy's identity. It was

because Tgurneu believed in Adlet Mayer, the strongest man in the world. And it seemed Adlet had delivered everything Tgurneu had hoped for.

Number thirty had just sent Tgurneu a messenger informing the commander about the situation inside the temple. Based on the Braves' current behavior, Tgurneu could infer what had happened.

Though the Braves had managed to figure out that Fremy was the Black Barrenbloom, Adlet had devised a plan to deceive them. After that, Adlet had most likely accused either Hans or Chamo of being the seventh. This had put Hans and Chamo in a precarious position, forcing them to leave the group.

Even Tgurneu couldn't imagine how Adlet had done it. But as long as he managed to keep Fremy safe, that was what mattered.

"This is rather troublesome, though," said Tgurneu. Its initial plan had been to wait until the Black Barrenbloom had completely absorbed the power of the Braves' crests. Then all the Braves of the Six Flowers (aside from Fremy) would die from the Evil God's toxin without ever knowing the truth. But the Braves had learned of the Black Barrenbloom's power, so now, they would do everything they could to stop it. Their options were to either kill Fremy, the body of the Black Barrenbloom, or kill the activator—Tgurneu itself.

Tgurneu was certain Fremy was not going to die. Adlet would have come up with a story to convince them they couldn't kill Fremy, which would leave them with only one option from here on out: devoting all their might in an effort to kill Tgurneu.

Thus far, the Braves had avoided direct combat, but things would be different now. They were sure to challenge Tgurneu and prepared to make sacrifices if they had to.

"Cómmander Tgurneu, why don't you separate from the army and hide? We need öny one möre day, or two at most, úntil the Barrenbloom is done absorbing the pöwer of the Crests of the Six Flowers. If you cän evade them until then, you will have won," said number two.

Tgurneu shook its head. "That plan is too passive. We have no idea what complications might arise now. Unforeseen events may lead the Braves right to my hiding spot. Something might happen that prevents even Adlet from

keeping Fremy safe. Though the chances of the latter are extremely low...the former is very possible.” Smiling, Tgurneu spread its tentacles wide. “I’m not going to run. I’ll meet our enemy, together with my army. I shall do them the honor of meeting them in their final, useless struggle.”

Number two nodded.

“Send one hundred elites to Hans and Chamo. All you need to do is slow them down. Obviously, it would be hard to kill the strongest of the Braves with only a hundred. I’ll command the remaining seven hundred to fight the other Braves who fled westward.

“I have to prepare for our final battle, you know. I’ll be busy.”

Number two was about to take off and pass the orders down the chain of command when Tgurneu stopped it. “Whoops, hold on. You can leave messenger duties to other fiends. You have a more important role.”

“...Y-yes, Cómmander?” Number two was a little confused.

Slow on the uptake, as usual, thought Tgurneu. “There’s something far more important than preparing for the final battle, isn’t there? Don’t you know what that is?”

When Tgurneu gave number two its orders, the aerial fiend’s mouth opened wide. It seemed flustered, unable to understand the point of these instructions.

Good grief. What to do with this bird? thought Tgurneu.

Three fiends were close on their heels. As Fremy took aim, Adlet whispered to her, “Don’t fire. No bombs, either. The sound will give our location away.”

She lowered her gun, and when a fiend rushed at her, she kicked it in the face instead. It flew backward into a field of blades that cut it to ribbons.

“No yelling, Rolonia,” Adlet ordered. “And, Dozzu, you don’t attack, either. Right now, the plan is to avoid detection and escape.”

Goldof avoided making any sound as he finished off the group of pursuers. Fremy didn’t even look at the bodies, focusing only on getting away.

Not long after the Braves left the Temple of Fate, Tgurneu’s army had discovered their party.

They had learned a lot at the temple—that Tgurneu’s secret weapon, the Black Barrenbloom, would absorb the power of the Crests of the Six Flowers. And that the Black Barrenbloom was Fremy herself.

At first, they had thought they could cancel the power of the Barrenbloom if Fremy killed herself, but that had turned out not to be true. Even after Fremy’s death, the Black Barrenbloom would retain some function through unknown means, or so Adlet had surmised, and Nashetania had overheard corroborating stories from the fiends. Fremy believed it was true.

So ultimately, there was only one way to stop the Black Barrenbloom: to kill Tgurneu. There were no other options. They had to kill the fiend commander, or eventually, the Black Barrenbloom would absorb the power of all the Crests. All the Braves but Fremy would be killed, leaving her alone.

How much time remained to them? Adlet’s, Mora’s, Rolonia’s, and the others’ Crests could vanish any minute. The mere thought of it made Fremy feel like her chest was tearing apart.

“...The entirety of the enemy’s army has entered the range of my clairvoyance,” Mora announced. “A fiend that seems to be Tgurneu stands just over a mile beyond the mountain’s summit.”

Immediately, Fremy turned to head the other way, straight for Tgurneu.

“Stop! Fremy!” Adlet cried. “Don’t rush this. You’re not gonna beat Tgurneu with a blind charge. We need to keep running and buy ourselves some time to make a plan.”

His brief comment brought Fremy back to her senses. There was no point in attacking right away. They didn’t even know if the fiend Mora had found was actually Tgurneu.

Under Mora’s guidance, they continued to flee the fiends’ pursuit. Rolonia stayed beside Adlet, putting her hands to his wounds and treating him as they ran.

“Relax,” said Adlet. “I’ll find a way to beat that thing. The strongest man in the world doesn’t lie.”

“But can you even fight, Adlet?” asked Dozzu.

Back at the temple, Adlet had been beaten to a bloody pulp. Goldof had given him some of the secret medicine from Piena, and drinking it was the only thing that had enabled him to move at all. Goldof had told him that while the medicine wouldn't heal his wounds, it would allow him to keep fighting without pain or any effects from his injuries, but of course, it would place an extreme strain on his body.

"Yeah," Adlet replied. "That medicine was quite the stuff. I would've loved something like that back in my training days."

"Its effects only last two or three hours, and you should be aware that hell will be waiting for you afterward," warned Nashetania.

Adlet smiled as if to say he was prepared for that. Fremy's heart ached at the thought. But she didn't have time for regrets. Right now, she just had to think about taking down Tgurneu.

"By the way, Dozzu, Nashetania—should you be following us?" Adlet asked the two of them next.

"What do you mean?" asked Dozzu.

"I'll be frank. We're in a dire spot. Wouldn't it better for you two to come up with your own strategy rather than sticking with us forever?"

Nashetania retorted, a little angrily, "Don't ask pointless questions, please. We have our own reasons for defeating Tgurneu, and that will be impossible without your cooperation."

"I just wanted to see how you'd answer. Don't get so upset," said Adlet.

"...I'm not upset. Lady Mora, do you have a grasp on the enemy's situation?" Nashetania inquired of Mora, who was at the center of their group. Her clairvoyance covered the whole mountain. They had to understand what was going on with the enemy first, or they'd never be able to come up with a plan.

"Our enemy numbers about seven hundred," reported Mora. That wasn't a number the Braves could beat in a straight fight. Even if every one of them fought to the death, they could probably take out only about four hundred or so. "About half a mile east of here lies a group of about a hundred fiends. In the center is a fiend in the shape of a tentacled wolf. It's giving orders to its

subordinates in code, so I can't understand what it is saying."

Fremy had encountered the tentacled wolf many times. It had always hated her, often treating her and her family with contempt. Though it wasn't counted among the specialists, it was one of the most capable of Tgurneu's flunkies.

"I guess that's their command center," said Adlet.

"The remaining six hundred fiends have separated into about fifty units to pursue us," Mora continued. "One unit is coming straight for us, while the others are circling to either side to catch us in a pincer attack."

Fremy could sense their presence. Here and there, she could hear the trees rustling and the fiends calling out.

"Fourteen aerial fiends are going back and forth between each unit and the wolf-fiend. They're exchanging some coded intelligence—playing both messenger and scout, most likely."

Looking up through the trees, Fremy could see the stars. Her eyes were sharp in the dark, and in the moonlight, she could clearly pick out the shapes of the fiends in the air.

"What about Hans and Chamo?" asked Adlet.

"I don't know. They're not within the range of my clairvoyant eye. I cannot guess where they may have gone, either."

Another cluster of fiends caught up to them then, screeching to summon aid. Nashetania and Goldof, on rear guard, met their attack.

This is bad, thought Fremy. All the nearby fiends would be coming for them at the same time. If they dawdled, they would be surrounded.

"Mora, look for a place where the enemy lines are thin," Adlet ordered. From afar, Mora took in the situation around them and then pointed to the south.

"Okay, then that's where we're going. Fremy, you handle the diversion." He threw some smoke bombs around them in all directions. Even if fiends had good night vision, they wouldn't be able to keep a visual lock on the party through the smoke in the dark forest.

Fremy created a cluster of bombs in her hands as well and flung them as hard

as she could to the north, opposite the direction Mora had indicated. The enemy mistook it as a signal the party would be going that way, and the sound of their footsteps receded.

Taking care to keep their own steps quiet, the party continued fleeing under Mora's guidance.

"It seems we've managed to avoid encirclement," said Mora. They'd spent over half an hour just running around. "If we had Chamo...her slave-fiends could have handled both rear guard and diversion."

Their battle at the Temple of Fate had brought one positive outcome: The chances that Hans was the seventh had risen dramatically. They'd learned that he'd ordered fiends to kill Fremy, and though they had no witnesses or proof, Fremy now believed the seventh couldn't be anyone but Hans.

But Chamo had refused to accept that, and she and Hans had left the party together. Now they didn't know where the pair was or what they were doing.

"There's no point in stewing over people who aren't here," said Fremy.

"Still, should we not attempt to join them?" Mora suggested.

"That would be risky. Chamo trusts Hans completely. If we were to meet again, we'd just have another falling out. We have to fight with the allies we have here."

"I do wonder if Chamo's all right..."

"Even Hans couldn't beat her that easily. Besides, we don't have the time to be worrying about her. Our problem is Tgurneu. Mora, was the wolf-fiend you mentioned earlier carrying a fig?" Fremy asked.

Tgurneu was a control-type fiend, meaning it had a unique ability. Its own body was shaped like a large fig, but if another fiend consumed it, Tgurneu could take over that fiend's body and control it. There was no point in just defeating the fiend Tgurneu controlled. They had to destroy its real body, or they couldn't win.

"I couldn't find one. If Tgurneu is hidden in the fiend's stomach, I have no way of seeing it, even with my clairvoyant eye." Mora shook her head.

Then Adlet said, “If I were in Tgurneu’s position...I’d make the wolf-fiend swallow some of me so I could control it, then hand the fig over to another fiend. Then I’d keep the one with my actual body hidden and inconspicuous. That would really make it hard for us to find it.”

Dozzu cut in there. “No, that would be impossible. Tgurneu’s real body must be within seven feet of the fiend it controls. Tgurneu’s ability is ineffective if the subjugated fiend is too far away. And Tgurneu can only control one fiend at a time.”

“Are you sure?” Adlet asked back.

“Tgurneu’s ability to take over other fiends is extremely weak—nowhere near on par with Archfiend Zophrair. The controller-type power is extremely difficult to acquire in the first place. Even if Tgurneu did develop the ability over the course of hundreds of years, you couldn’t expect it to grow very much.”

“...We’ve got no choice but to believe you there. So that ups the chances that the wolf-fiend has Tgurneu’s main body...” Adlet put his hand to his jaw and thought.

“I believe the wolf-fiend I found does carry Tgurneu’s real body,” said Mora. “It’s clearly giving orders to the fiend army as a whole. We can’t be wasting time. We should return and defeat that wolf-fiend.”

But Adlet shook his head. “No. It’s gotta be a decoy pretending to be Tgurneu. Tgurneu wouldn’t be somewhere so obvious.”

“But...”

“I’m sure Tgurneu would be hiding somewhere safe, somewhere it would never catch our eye. That’s definitely what I’d do in that position.”

Unable to counter that, Mora fell silent. Fremy agreed with Adlet.

“S-so then...how do we find Tgurneu?” Rolonia asked, but no one could reply. Fremy had no plans, and Adlet’s and Dozzu’s mouths both remained shut. Mora probably had no way of doing it, either, even with her ability.

Adlet asked Dozzu, “You were close friends with Tgurneu, and you knew each other for a long time, right? Don’t you have any clues as to where its real body

might be?”

“...Unfortunately, I have nothing.”

Useless when it matters most, thought Fremy as her distrust of Dozzu mounted. It could know and just be hiding it. Dozzu and Nashetania were their enemies, at their core, and the Braves were working with them only because they shared a common foe in Tgurneu. Chances were still good that Dozzu and Tgurneu were working together to entrap the Braves.

“Wh-what do we do, Addy? Fremy? We have to find Tgurneu, or we’ll never win.” Rolonia was no help. The group fell silent again. Tgurneu’s control was weak, but even so, it could be a powerful tool depending on how it was used. It was extremely effective when Tgurneu was employing it for concealment.

Fremy looked up at the sky through the gaps in the treetops. A single aerial fiend was leisurely gliding through the night. It didn’t take notice of their party and simply circled in the air.

“<Cómmander Tgurneu.>”

The fiend speaking in code, specialist number eleven, was in a forest quite a ways south of Adlet’s party’s location. Its mission was to defend Tgurneu, and it had refined its ability for that sake. It took the form of a goat. “<Has the wolf-fiend managed to deceive the Braves?>” it asked its commander.

Tgurneu had already left the wolf-fiend’s body and transferred to another, after ordering the wolf to issue orders to the army as a decoy for the commander. This was to make the Braves of the Six Flowers mistake Tgurneu’s position. Right now, the wolf-fiend was among about a hundred fiends in the fake command center, desperately directing the troops. Tgurneu had already anticipated that the Braves would be targeting it and it alone, so as long as they couldn’t figure out where Tgurneu was, its victory was certain.

“Who knows? I might have deceived them, or they might have figured it out. Well, it doesn’t matter,” Tgurneu mused indifferently. It spoke not in code but plain speech, supposing there was no risk the Braves would hear.

Number eleven stopped using code as well. “Indeed, you’re quite right, Cómmander. Evèn if they do discöver the wolf-fiend isn’t you, there will be

nöthing they can do. I believe you are sâfe.”

“That’s right. Your prattle is irritating, so could you be quiet?” Tgurneu snapped, sounding irritated. Flustered, number eleven quickly shut its mouth.

“Has number two not returned yet? Just what is it doing?” Tgurneu murmured.

The real command center, where Tgurneu and number eleven were, was about half a mile away from the fake one. Tgurneu was maintaining an appropriate distance from both the fake command center and the Braves, moving along quietly so as not to draw attention.

That was when an aerial fiend swooped over to order them in code. “<Message from Cómmander Tgurneu to unit eleven! The Braves are möving farther westward! Circle âhead to meet them!>”

“<Roger. Réport to Cómmander Tgurneu that we will keep the Braves in chëck!>” number eleven replied, and the aerial fiend soared back toward the fake command center.

The majority of the seven hundred in Tgurneu’s army didn’t know where their leader really was. They believed it to be inside the wolf-fiend it had been controlling earlier. Only a handful knew its true location: the guards in Tgurneu’s own unit; its aide, specialist number two; the wolf pretending to be Tgurneu; and the few fiends who had been entrusted with messenger roles. Tgurneu believed it was best for as few as possible to know the truth.

“...Cómmander. Are you concerned ábout something?”

Tgurneu was watching the sky the whole time as it waited for number two’s report, and number eleven knew number two’s orders.

“Didn’t I just say you were annoying me?” Tgurneu demanded, and number eleven closed its mouth again.

No matter what the Braves of the Six Flowers did, though, Tgurneu surely wouldn’t die. Number eleven was certain. The fiends of Tgurneu’s real unit had all been cultivated expressly for this day. When the final battle came, they would protect Tgurneu. They had dedicated hundreds of years to nothing but that task.

“We’ve gone too far, Cómmander,” said number eleven right when they were about to ascend a slope.

“Whoops.” Tgurneu came to a halt. It had nearly entered the range of Mora’s clairvoyance. Number eleven felt a wave of anxiety. It knew that even if Mora’s clairvoyance swept over them, she wouldn’t be able to detect Tgurneu. But you never knew what would happen in battle. Mora’s power was the one thing they had to be careful with.

Indifferent to number eleven’s concerns, Tgurneu gazed up at the sky. Its mind seemed to be elsewhere. “Come quickly, number two. I’m waiting for your report.”

Through a series of diversions and daring escapes, the party ran hither and thither. The deep woods helped them manage to avoid the fiends’ eyes, but they all understood they weren’t getting anywhere at this rate.

First, Nashetania and Goldof acted as decoys to lead the pursuit southward while the rest of them fled in the opposite direction and hid on a mountain slope.

About a thousand feet away, across a valley, they saw a group of about a hundred fiends tossing together a bonfire, then standing together in a clump. The party watched them intently but saw no indication that the fiends had noticed their party.

Deciding that Mora’s clairvoyant observations weren’t enough information, Adlet suggested they get a more direct look at the fiends’ central formation. Though aware it was dangerous, the party drew closer to the core of the enemy forces.

“Fremy, Dozzu, look close. There has to be a clue somewhere,” said Adlet.

Fremy focused her gaze and observed the army. The wolf-fiend was in their center. Defenses around it were so tight not even an ant could approach, or so it seemed.

Aerial fiends descended one after another to exchange words with the wolf-fiend before immediately flying off again. The wolf appeared to be commanding the army, as Mora had said.

“Hellooooo! Good eeeeevening!” Suddenly, the wolf-fiend called out to them. Fremy was startled, but they hadn’t truly been discovered. “Good eeeeevening! Would you mind coming out? There’s something I’d like to discuss with both you Braves and you, Dozzu. Why don’t you both join forces with me temporarily to defeat Cargikk? Hellooooo! Can you hear meeee?” the wolf-fiend called, scanning the area. Though its voice was unfamiliar, its verbal mannerisms were Tgurneu’s. Its speech wasn’t awkward like the other fiends’.

But Fremy thought, *This isn’t Tgurneu* . It lacked the arrogance dripping from each of Tgurneu’s seemingly kind remarks. She felt none of the inexplicable discomfort that accompanied his playful manipulation. “I can tell from its tone—it’s a good impression, but that’s not Tgurneu,” she said.

Adlet nodded. “...So you think so, too? I agree. I can’t say what it is or how, but...something about it’s different.”

But they couldn’t say that for sure, so Fremy continued scrutinizing it.

There were many familiar faces among the dozens of fiends beside the wolf. Tgurneu could be among them, or there might be some clue that would lead them to its real location.

“Um...Addy, Dozzu? I was just thinking...,” said Rolonia. “Is Tgurneu even around here at all? Tgurneu knows as long as it stays alive, we’ll all die because of the Black Barrenbloom. Wouldn’t it leave its army and just run straight in the other direction?” Adlet grimaced. So she’d been thinking that, too.

“That would mean this isn’t the time to be worrying about the army. If Tgurneu is on the run, we have to get away from here and chase it down. If we wait, we’ll miss any leads that could help us find it.”

“No. It is here. Tgurneu is sure to be taking command of the army here,” Dozzu said firmly. “Tgurneu...doesn’t trust even a single member of this army. Not even number two, his aide, or the three-winged fiend that served as his body for many years were given full trust.”

“I know that,” said Fremy. “What about it?”

“Because of me and Cargikk, Tgurneu is constantly afraid of betrayal. He’s terrified that any officers might be my comrades, or that I might convince them

to turn traitor, or that they might turn their back on him in favor of Cargikk. Tgurneu cannot leave this army. He can't have peace of mind without keeping constant watch on it," Dozzu continued. "Tgurneu has purged all talented fiends from these forces, too. Every fiend that was capable of leading large groups and taking command, that could think for themselves and make their own judgments, either betrayed Tgurneu for me or Cargikk or was taken out before they could do so.

"Even if Tgurneu wanted to leave command to other fiends, not a single one remains that could."

"What a fool," Fremy muttered.

"...Exactly so. Tgurneu is incredibly foolish."

"Then it's close by," said Adlet. "Which means...we have a chance at winning this. Fremy, look closer at the fiends."

Dozens of the pack were familiar to her, and Fremy's eyes landed on one in particular, a caterpillar-fiend. It was well-known within Tgurneu's faction. Specialist number seventeen, with the regenerative capabilities to heal the wounds of any fiend. She had never seen it in person before; she'd thought Tgurneu was saving it. Tgurneu must have finally decided to send it into the field.

"A healing fiend, huh...nothing else?" asked Adlet. Fremy searched for others that would catch her eye, but of course, she didn't know every ability of every fiend.

That was when her eye stopped on one on the fringe of the small army, a slender and supple-looking leopard-fiend slinking around with feline grace. For some reason, she couldn't get it off her mind. There were others present with which she was familiar, but this leopard-fiend was the only one she couldn't take her eyes off. She tried to recall when she'd seen it before, but the answer refused to come.

"...They're talking about something," Adlet muttered. Looking over, Fremy saw a red hedgehog-fiend, about twenty inches long, beside the wolf-fiend. She'd never seen this one before. The wolf discussed something with the hedgehog, then gave instructions to a flying fiend in the sky. They couldn't hear

what any of them were saying.

Fremy watched the hedgehog for a while. Before the wolf-fiend gave directions to any subordinate, it would always speak with that hedgehog. An odd pattern, if Tgurneu was controlling the wolf-fiend. Tgurneu hardly ever asked the opinions of subordinates.

Quietly, Dozzu murmured, "That's...number twenty-four."

Just then, one of the flying fiends spotted their group. Right as Fremy noticed, its screech brought the forces around the wolf-fiend to their feet.

"Run!" Adlet yelled, and they all broke into a sprint. Fremy threw every bomb she had at the fiends, while Dozzu's lightning and Adlet's smoke bombs held back pursuit.

"You surprised me. Why didn't you tell me you were close by? Did you come to talk to me?" the wolf-fiend called languidly. But they ignored it and ran. Fremy took on the role of rear guard, gun up and bombs flying.

"Heeeey! What about your greetings? They're the first step toward living a bright life!"

While keeping their pursuers at bay, Fremy searched for the leopard-fiend still on her mind. That was when she saw fiends clustering around it, as if blocking Fremy's line of fire to protect it from her bullets.

"...Who is that?" Not only did the leopard-fiend abstain from the pursuit, others were guarding it, too. Fremy was sure that meant something.

About ten minutes later, thanks to Fremy's efforts deterring the enemy, they had managed to escape the fiends constantly trying to surround them. Now, they were taking a rest. They'd also managed to join up with Nashetania and Goldof, who had been off acting as a diversion.

"...We shook off pursuit. It seems we have some respite to discuss," said Mora.

The first thing Adlet did was address Dozzu. "You said something, didn't you? About a number twenty-four or something?"

"Yes, let me explain in more detail. Some of my comrades who infiltrated

Tgurneu's faction investigated the abilities of Tgurneu's specialists for me. I'm quite certain the red hedgehog-fiend that was talking with the wolf-fiend was specialist number twenty-four." Fremy had never seen or heard of that one before.

"What's its ability?" asked Adlet.

"Number twenty-four is a pair of fiends that work as one. They were originally two different beings, but they fused together in order to gain new abilities.

"Even when separated, the number twenty-fours can share knowledge and sensations. Anything that one of them has heard and seen is communicated to the other instantaneously."

"Huh...? How would that be useful?" Rolonia tilted her head.

"Don't you see? That's a really powerful ability. Using this fiend, you can communicate information without beacons or messengers. Instantly," said Adlet.

The explanation was enough for Rolonia to realize its importance.

"Number twenty-four's ability has a range of about six miles. If the pair are any farther apart, they can no longer exchange knowledge. That's all I know about it," Dozzu said, supplementing its explanation.

Fremy added, "The wolf-fiend spoke with number twenty-four over and over."

Adlet was the next to speak. "I thought that was strange, too. Like the wolf was looking to the hedgehog for instructions."

"So in other words, one of the number twenty-fours has Tgurneu's real body?" suggested Rolonia.

But Adlet shook his head. "No, I doubt that. Tgurneu isn't controlling either number twenty-four or the wolf-fiend. It's using the wolf-fiend as a decoy while the real Tgurneu is in hiding and giving instructions through number twenty-four."

"I believe that's a reasonable assumption," said Dozzu.

"I've got no proof, but we do have enough evidence to tell us the wolf-fiend

isn't Tgurneu. Next, I think we should form our strategy based on that assumption." There were no objections to Adlet's proposal.

Fremy didn't argue with him, either. She'd deduced from its tone that the wolf wasn't Tgurneu at the very beginning.

"It looks like number twenty-four is gonna be an important clue in our search for Tgurneu," Adlet continued. "You said there are two. So do they both look the same?"

Dozzu replied, "They're both hedgehog types, but they differ in color. One is red, while the other is blue. The one we saw there was the red one."

"Then that means the one with Tgurneu is the blue number twenty-four, huh? So if we can find it, that'll mean Tgurneu is nearby, right?" Adlet posited.

Fremy shook her head. "It'll be difficult to find. There are transforming fiends that can change the bodies of other fiends. I used one myself in the past to sneak into the human realms."

"What do you mean?"

"Even if the blue number twenty-four is with Tgurneu, it may not necessarily be a hedgehog. A transforming fiend may have changed its appearance. No—This is Tgurneu, and Tgurneu is cautious. The chances are very high."

"In other words..."

"It would be extremely difficult to pick out the other number twenty-four from among all seven hundred fiends."

Adlet ground his teeth. They had too little information to pin down Tgurneu's location.

Then Mora warned them that the enemy was bearing down on them again, and the chase began anew.

The party ran all through the forest, engaging with fiend units and retreating, engaging, and retreating over and over. Tgurneu could have been hiding among any of the thirteen units, so they kept on fighting in search of clues.

"No matter where Tgurneu is holed up, we should be able to find some hint," said Adlet. "If we get close, the fiends are bound to do something to protect

their leader. And there are seven hundred. No matter how hard Tgurneu tries to hide, one is bound to give something away. Don't overlook anything."

As they fought, Fremy focused intently on the enemy behavior. Were any fiends protecting one in particular? Were any of them acting strangely and trying to run away? But her observations turned up nothing.

Gradually, even Adlet began showing signs of impatience. "It's no use... Tgurneu hasn't told its underlings where it really is. The majority believes the wolf-fiend is Tgurneu."

"That sounds about right," said Dozzu. "Tgurneu doesn't trust any subordinate and would only share important information with a limited few."

"Stalemate, huh...? But Tgurneu has to be nearby. Fremy, can you recall anything? It doesn't matter how small. Anything you saw or heard when you were with Tgurneu's faction. We just don't have enough information right now."

Asking that won't help, thought Fremy. Adlet was getting really anxious, and such a vague request was not going to make her remember anything.

If anything had been nagging at her, it was the leopard-fiend. The way the others had protected it was unnatural. Something was going on there.

That was when she remembered when she'd seen that leopard-fiend before.

It was a year after Fremy had become the Saint of Gunpowder, back when she'd believed the contempt for her family would stop if she became a full-fledged, powerful fiend. She was convinced they could live without experiencing discrimination.

But even after she had acquired the power of a Saint, the scornful remarks hadn't abated. In fact, the other fiends assumed they were raising a traitor, and the attacks got worse.

One night, Fremy had been away from her family, walking alone through the Cut-Finger Forest, gun in hand and plenty of bombs hanging from her belt. She was going to attack a fiend roost on the edge of the forest. Unable to take the violence and hatred anymore, she was ready to die and take them with her, if need be.

That leopard-fiend had been among the twenty or so there.

With a roar, Fremy assailed the fiends, flinging her bombs every which way. About half charged at her, while the rest fled as fast as they could. The leopard-fiend was among the latter, racing faster than any fiend Fremy had ever seen before. She was aiming for the fleeing leopard-fiend when it had simply vanished.

She'd been so worked up at the time, she hadn't paid it any mind at all. She hadn't known about the stealth ability then, either, and believed its disappearance had just been a trick of the light.

The other fiends had then overwhelmed her, held her down, and retaliated in full force. She'd managed to survive, but the scars remained.

Fremy understood why the leopard-fiend had caught her attention—it had reminded her of the time she'd let it escape. Fremy doubted it would amount to much of a clue, but she told them anyway. It was fast and had the stealth ability, but that didn't seem like enough information to be useful.

Dozzu was clearly disappointed; the others were trying to think of anything else that could be a clue.

Except for Adlet. "...I've got it." He was the only one smiling.

"The fiends will be approaching this area—and soon. We must move," reported Mora. They all set out through the forest after her.

Tgurneu's location was slightly over a mile to the south of Adlet's party. Number eleven accompanied the commander, not leaving its side for even a moment.

Arms crossed, Tgurneu listened to a report from specialist number twenty-four. It had the ability to share knowledge and sensations with its other half from a distance. Normally, it bore the shape of a blue hedgehog, but right now, a transforming fiend had transformed it into a large ape.

"<Whät are you doing? You let thëm get that close, and you say you let them éscape, too?>" Number eleven was openly furious at the news.

"<I-it wäsn't my fault, number eleven... Our troops are too féw to be chäsing

them down.>” Number twenty-four repeated the false Tgurneu verbatim. The other number twenty-four would do the same at the fake command center, enabling Tgurneu’s unit and the wolf-fiend to converse just as if they were side by side.

All intelligence from the scattered units of the army was consolidated at the wolf-fiend’s location, and the wolf-fiend would pass on this information to Tgurneu immediately through number twenty-four. Tgurneu would give instructions to the wolf, and the wolf would pass those orders along. This was how Tgurneu commanded its army of seven hundred.

“<Well, it doesn’t matter,>” Tgurneu interrupted from beside them. “<You’re doing well. All you need to do is pretend to be me. I don’t believe someone like you could ever defeat the Braves in the first place.>”

“<Yes, Cómmander, thank you very much,>” number twenty-four quoted the wolf-fiend to Tgurneu.

“<I haven’t a clue what you’re so grateful for,>” Tgurneu spat coldly. “<So have the Braves learned anything, like how you’re not actually me or how number twenty-four is connecting us?>”

“<Impössible. All they’ve done is watch us fróm áfar. They couldn’t pössibly have figúred out what’s going on wíthin our forces.>”

Upon hearing this assessment from the wolf-fiend, Tgurneu thought for a while. “<I’m not so sure about that. Well, whatever. More importantly, you haven’t forgotten your orders, have you?>”

“<N-not át all! Your orders häven’t left my mind for ëven a moment, of course!>”

“<It won’t do me any good if all you do is remember them. Have you had the pawns carry out the plan to the letter?>”

“<Of course! I’ve réminded all the fiends mäny times to absólutely not kill Fremy or Adlet—that they may injure them but not finísh them off.>”

“<Good. No matter what happens, absolutely do not kill them. Even if they’re about to kill you, even if they’re nearing my position, you aren’t to kill either of them. Do you understand?>”

Listening to the conversation between Tgurneu and the wolf-fiend, number eleven sensed something was off.

Of course, Tgurneu would order them not to kill Fremy or Adlet. Adlet was the seventh, and Fremy was the Black Barrenbloom, the cornerstone of Tgurneu's plan. Number eleven and the wolf-fiend had been told as much on the way to the temple. Tgurneu had also explained about its ability to manipulate love and the power of the Black Barrenbloom.

But it seemed like Tgurneu was overly fixated on those two. Less like they were necessary for victory and more like Tgurneu had some other goal in mind. On top of that, Tgurneu had been acting oddly for some time now. It had been continuously lost in thought, as if killing the Braves was a secondary goal. And when Tgurneu gave orders to the wolf-fiend, it did so with little enthusiasm.

"<If you kill Fremy or Adlet, the whole lot of you will suffer the consequences. I'll order my whole army to kill themselves right here, you included. Any number of fiends could replace all of you, but Fremy and Adlet are irreplaceable. Make sure you understand that perfectly.>"

Why go to such extremes? wondered number eleven. But Tgurneu hated unnecessary questions, and so, unable to give voice to its curiosity, number eleven remained silent by Tgurneu's side.

The Braves' party ran farther west to shake off the army, and in the forest, they found a moss-covered stone hut and a waterway that ran from the peak of the mountain to its foot. These structures weren't built by fiends or even by the humans Tgurneu had brought in. These were ancient ruins from the time before the Evil God.

Before the arrival of the Evil God, humans had lived in this land. It was said that when the Saint of the Single Flower chased the Evil God down to this peninsula, most of the humans there had already died from the toxin, while the survivors had fled to the continent.

The remaining ruins had largely been demolished by the fiends, but some remnants of the ancient times still stood in a handful of places in the Howling Vilelands.

Once the whole group was gathered in the shadow of a hut, Adlet quietly

began speaking. They leaned their heads close together. “...No sign of the enemy around, Mora? If they hear what I’m about to say, it’s over.”

“It’s all right. What’s this idea of yours?”

“Fremy, tell us just a little more about that leopard-fiend you mentioned earlier,” Adlet prompted.

Somewhat puzzled, Fremy gave the account one more time: Though she’d only seen it once, the leopard-fiend had the stealth ability, and it was fast.

“Hey, have you ever told anyone that you’re aware of the leopard-fiend’s ability?” Adlet asked.

“Of course not. I didn’t think anything of it until I saw it again just now.”

“Do you think the leopard-fiend knows you’ve found out?”

“I doubt it. The fight was total chaos, and the leopard-fiend ran immediately.” Fremy didn’t know what Adlet was getting at.

Nashetania, though, seemed to have an idea. “I see. The stealth ability is ideal for running and hiding from enemies. In other words, Tgurneu is inside that fiend or plans to use it as its body. That’s what you mean, right, Adlet?”

“Nope.”

Mora was the next to speak. “So what was that leopard-fiend? The others were protecting it. Fremy saw it, and so did I. It wasn’t participating in the battle, and another fiend sacrificed itself to defend it from Fremy’s shot. That leopard-fiend must play some important role.”

“That’s right. That leopard-fiend is important,” Adlet said, scanning the sky. Once he was sure no fiends were watching, he continued. “First, let’s nail down our assumptions. Tgurneu is commanding the whole army through the wolf-fiend—the fake Tgurneu. And number twenty-four is connecting Tgurneu and the wolf-fiend. Tgurneu itself is hidden around here somewhere, within a six-mile radius. I think that much is certain.”

“Right,” said Fremy.

Adlet went on. “What if we were to kill one of the number twenty-fours? Tgurneu would be in trouble. It wouldn’t be able to give orders to the army. So

what would Tgurneu do then? And what would the fake Tgurneu do?”

“...I suppose the wolf would order the fliers to go to Tgurneu and ask for instructions and then come back to the wolf-fiend. Th-though I can’t be sure,” Rolonia said.

Adlet nodded. “And if the fiends in the air were already dead, what would it do then?”

That was when Fremy figured out what Adlet was trying to say. “It would have no choice but to send a messenger to the lower ranks—on foot.”

“And who would the wolf-fiend use as the messenger?”

The others were getting it. Mora slapped her knee. Dozzu’s eyes widened, and then the fiend fell into thought. Nashetania was looking at Adlet, impressed. Even the ever-taciturn Goldof seemed to have gotten the message—though his expression didn’t change at all.

“Um...I guess...the leopard-fiend...then? Um, I’m sorry if I’m mistaken, though,” said Rolonia.

Fremy’s information told them that the leopard-fiend was in every way perfect for delivering messages. It was fast, and it had the rare stealth ability for evading the Braves’ eyes. They’d be hard-pressed to find another more suited for the job.

“We’re gonna have the leopard-fiend lead us to Tgurneu,” declared Adlet.

As a bat-like fiend swooped down from the sky, the wolf-fiend watched it calmly from the center of a ring of a hundred fiends.

Imitating Tgurneu was more challenging than it had anticipated. Tgurneu always acted calm to those around it, spoke in a casual and insouciant manner—even told humanlike jokes from time to time. Just imitating the intonation was strain enough, not to mention coming up with things Tgurneu would say.

“<Cómmander Tgurneu, the Braves have been díscóvered at the hut near the wäterway!>” the bat-fiend alighted to say.

Immediately, the wolf-fiend replied, “<Your greetings?>”

“<I do ápologize. It’s quite late töníght, but häve you been doing well?>”

“<As you can see, I’m feeling wonderful. The Braves are going steadily to their doom. Continue pursuit and circle them as before. They’ll exhaust themselves soon enough.>” *That sounds like Tgurneu, surely* , the wolf-fiend thought, satisfied with its own acting.

“<But they’ve all gäthered in one place, and they may be scheming. We believe they are putting tógether a plöt to target you, Cómmander Tgurneu.>”

The wolf-fiend pretended to consider. “<That’s no issue. Continue pursuit with units one and three taking the lead. However, do be careful of Mora. Her clairvoyance is the one thing that will be a bit of a nuisance.>” The wolf-fiend parroted what Tgurneu had told it to the bat-fiend word-for-word, and the bat-fiend flew away. The wolf was relieved to have managed to avoid exposing itself.

Earlier, when the Braves attacked, it thought its core would burst with fear. The most terrifying prospect would be if the red number twenty-four was killed. If that happened, communications with Tgurneu would be severed.

In that case, the wolf-fiend would have no choice but to send number two flying to Tgurneu to seek instructions. Then, if number two didn’t return and none of the aerial fiends were available either, it would have no choice but to send the leopard-fiend running to Tgurneu. The leopard was also aware that the wolf-fiend wasn’t Tgurneu.

“<Whëre is Cómmander Tgurneu?>” the leopard-fiend asked the red number twenty-four, using a special code known to only a certain few fiends to prevent the rest from discovering the wolf’s true identity.

“<Two and a hälf miles south, near a wäterway just over a mile east of the anciënt ruins. Tgurneu has said they’ll rémain there for a while.>”

The leopard-fiend nodded and informed the wolf-fiend, “<You should know that barring extreme círcumstances, you’re not to send me änywhere. Cómmander Tgurneu has ordered we not give them even the slightest clue that would lead them to the true center of cómmand.>”

The wolf-fiend understood. Tgurneu was terrifying. Any fiend that acted against its will, no matter how dedicated they were, would be executed. But what all fiends feared, even more than death, was being deemed useless and

discarded.

A messenger came flying toward the wolf-fiend to inform them that it had lost sight of the Braves entirely.

With the treetops above them, the party ran out of the valley, hiding from the eyes of the aerial fiends. Before long, the area around them was clear, and Mora said they didn't need to worry about being attacked for a while.

Adlet glared at the map, light stone in hand. This map was the one Nashetania had given him with the geography of the Howling Vilelands described in finer detail. As he examined it, he asked question after question of his allies to help him draw up a scheme based on the capabilities of his party members.

"Is the plan complete, Adlet?" asked Mora.

Adlet pointed to a point on the map and said, "Yeah, it's all coming together. We're gonna do it here. We'll meander around on our way so they can't tell it's our goal. We're gonna make it look like we just got lost and wound up there by accident. On the way, we'll work out the details." He continued, "Okay, let's nail down our goal: We have to cut off contact between the wolf-fiend and Tgurneu. The leopard won't relay any messages as long as there's another means of communication, so we have to kill both the red number twenty-four and all the fliers in our way, too. I leave that to you, Fremy."

Fremy nodded. From the shadow of the trees, she was checking the number of fiends overhead. There were fourteen in total, and none were made for fighting. It would be easy to snipe them down. "Understood. But I think it would be a bad idea to kill them all."

"Why?"

"The enemy is mobilized in small units, and the aerial fiends are delivering orders from Tgurneu to each one. If all the aerial fiends go down, Tgurneu would have a hard time managing the army. It might concentrate its forces and retreat."

"I see...", Adlet mused.

"I'll leave one or two of the aerial fiends alive, and right when I kill the red number twenty-four, I'll drop the rest. That should enable us to fragment the

avenues of contact without letting Tgurneu escape.”

“Can you do that?”

Fremy nodded firmly. “I have an idea. Leave it to me.”

Next, Adlet looked at Dozzu and said, “Moving on. Once the leopard-fiend runs to Tgurneu, we’ll have to track it. If Tgurneu is within the range of Mora’s clairvoyance, that’s no problem, but Tgurneu will probably stay out of range. It’ll be wary of her.”

“So then me?” Dozzu asked.

“You’re the fastest runner among us, and since you’re small, you’re perfect for tailing someone. Follow the leopard-fiend at a good distance. Can you do that?”

Dozzu replied, “I must say it would be difficult. I don’t know how fast that leopard-fiend can run. And also, even if I do know how to see through the stealth ability, it’s still a concern.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got an idea.” Adlet pulled out a light gem. It was the smallest he had, less than half the size of his pinkie nail.

Next, he opened his iron box and pulled out a little bottle. He mixed the liquid inside with some dirt and kneaded it into a paste, then buried the light gem inside it. Instantly, the light gem looked like nothing more than a grimy glob. The dirt blocked the faint light so well, it couldn’t be seen at all. “Stick this onto the leopard-fiend.”

Dozzu tilted its head as if to ask *Whatever for?*

“Mora, lend Dozzu the ability to detect hieroforms.”

Mora nodded and gently touched Dozzu’s head. She chanted the words, and Dozzu’s eyes shone faintly.

“How’s that, Dozzu?” asked Adlet. “Now you can see it fine, right?”

Fremy recalled what Mora had said back in the lava zone. When a hieroform was used, traces of that power would remain. Borrowing Mora’s power would enable someone to see those traces.

Two days ago, Adlet had used that ability to search for Goldof.

“I can see a faint haze of light,” said Dozzu. “So I take it this is the vestiges of the hieroform’s power? I’ve heard this secret technique was passed down in All Heavens Temple, but this is the first time I’ve ever experienced it.”

“You think it’s enough for you to stay on the leopard-fiend?” Adlet verified.

“I can do it. I just have to maintain some distance as I follow the haze. I won’t fail,” Dozzu assured him.

“Mora, lend the others the power to see the hieroform, too.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t. This power is costly. Two is my limit.”

“Then...lend me and Dozzu the ability. One of us will go after the leopard.”

Mora nodded. “But if the leopard-fiend realizes a light gem has been affixed to it, then the plan will come to nothing. Do you have a means to deal with this, Adlet?”

“I couldn’t put together this plan if I didn’t, could I?” Adlet boasted. This was true, so Mora fell silent. “The leopard-fiend will head out to deliver its message, and it should stop eventually. That’ll be where Tgurneu is. Once you see that, Dozzu, fire a real big lightning strike into the sky. The rest of us will rush there as fast as we can.”

Dozzu considered this for a while. “Understood. But a problem remains. I can’t hold Tgurneu there on my own. He will escape before you reach me.”

“About that...sorry, but I haven’t gathered all my thoughts yet. Do any you have any good ideas?” Adlet looked around at the others.

“Leave that to me.” Mora raised her hand. “I still have some hieroform stakes I used to erect barriers. Use this. All my remaining stakes create barriers that prevent intrusion from the outside, but if I overwrite the hieroglyphs, it will also be possible to raise a barrier that prevents escape from the inside.”

“Thanks. That’ll be a big help, Mora. How long’ll it take for you to rewrite the hieroglyphs?”

“Ten minutes will be enough.”

“Okay. Dozzu, once you find Tgurneu, raise the barrier and seal it in. Then, protect the barrier until we arrive and kill it.”

“Understood. Please leave it to me.” Dozzu bowed.

Mora pulled a stake carved with hieroglyphs out of her habit and deftly began rewriting the characters with a sharp edge on her gauntlet.

“Addy...can we even beat Tgurneu? We couldn’t when we fought it before.” Rolonia fretted anxiously.

Adlet recalled when they’d first arrived at the Howling Vilelands—when Tgurneu had leaped up from underground. The group had surrounded the fiend and attacked it, but they’d failed to finish it off and ended up retreating.

“Relax,” said Adlet. “Back then, we didn’t know who the seventh was, and that kept us from fighting at full strength. Now things are different. Besides, now we know the secret hidden inside Tgurneu’s body. If all of us surround it, we can kill it, for sure.”

“There’s still one more uncertain factor,” interjected Fremy. “Dozzu and Nashetania told us Tgurneu has the ability to control human minds. Even if we get Tgurneu surrounded, one of us might be manipulated into joining the enemy.”

“...When we approach Tgurneu, if you feel like you’re starting to be controlled, retreat immediately and urge the others to be cautious. That’s all we can do.”

“That’s it?”

“Fremy,” said Mora, “speculating about an ability that may not even exist is of no use. Coming up with countermeasures is pointless. I believe all we can do is cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“Frankly, this whole plan is full of bridges to cross,” Adlet said with a wry smile.

Nashetania resurfaced from her silent reverie and said, “...I have serious doubts this plan will succeed, Adlet.”

“What’s the problem? If you have any opinions, by all means.”

“Dozzu will be able to trail the leopard-fiend, and I think if we find Tgurneu, we can win. But will the leopard-fiend even run toward Tgurneu in the first place? What if a messenger comes from Tgurneu’s location to the wolf-fiend? The wolf might not bother sending a messenger and decide to judge for itself instead. It’s too uncertain.”

“Nice, Nashetania. That’s the obvious question.” Adlet smiled. “What we’ll do is leave the wolf-fiend no choice but to a runner to Tgurneu. We just have to cause an emergency the wolf-fiend thinks it can’t resolve without asking for Tgurneu’s guidance.”

“An emergency? How?”

Adlet licked his finger and raised it to check the wind’s direction. Then he looked up at the sky, thick with stars, and nodded to himself. “Clear skies and good winds. It’ll work.”

He showed them all the map he’d borrowed from Nashetania and pointed to a spot about three miles west of their current location, a basin between three mountains. According to the map, that area was forested. To the north was a massive precipice, while to the south were ruins built by ancient civilizations before the arrival of the Evil God. Adlet indicated a point on the north side of those ruins.

“We’ll lure the fiends here. Someone will act as a decoy to draw the enemies there for us. And then, once all the fiends have surrounded our bait...”

“We do what?” asked Nashetania.

“We set fire to the whole forest around them. We’ll incinerate the whole crowd.”

The group all rushed into the mountain cave and huddled together. Adlet had told them to keep the plans concealed from the fiends at all costs.

First, he pulled a number of securely sealed iron bottles from his box and mixed their contents. “This is one of the secret tools Atreau came up with. It’s an ingredient in the fire I spit from my mouth, as well as my bombs. And you can adjust its properties on the spot, to a degree. Before I interrupted the Tournament Before the Divine, I did some research on my own to make it even

more powerful.”

Once the chemicals were mixed, Adlet dipped a dead leaf in the solution until it was soaked and tossed it back into the cave. He covered the entrance with a cloth so it couldn't be seen from the outside, then used the flint in his teeth to make sparks and ignite the leaf.

“Huh?!”

To everyone's shock, the dead leaf erupted into a pillar of flame. The fire didn't dissipate immediately, either, continuing to burn for nearly a minute. The strength of the blaze was unbelievable.

“How about that? Pretty intense stuff, huh?” Adlet smiled. “Fremy, make us a whole ton of gunpowder. We're gonna stick it to a bunch of dead leaves like this one, then scatter them all over the forest.

“Fortunately, the wind's blowing from the north. The sky's pretty clear, and the air's dry, too. Ignite your gunpowder, and the leaves will go up all at once. Before you know it, the forest'll be a sea of fire.” Adlet crushed the cinders with his foot to put out the flames. “I don't know how many fiends we can draw into the fire, but it should be a major blow to Tgurneu's forces.

“Now, look at it from the wolf-fiend's position. It's been getting orders from Tgurneu through number twenty-four to help it command the army. But the red twenty-four is dead, the aerial fiends have been shot down, and any means of contact with Tgurneu is cut off. Meanwhile, the forest catches fire, and tons of fiends are getting fried. What'll the wolf-fiend do?”

“...Report the situation to Tgurneu and ask for instructions,” said Fremy. “Like whether it should head over to save the fiends, retreat, or ignore the forest fire and keep on fighting the Braves.”

“That's right. So the wolf will send the leopard-fiend running toward Tgurneu. There might be other messengers besides the leopard-fiend, but we'll hold them back so they can't go anywhere.

“Then, Dozzu will trail the leopard to Tgurneu and hold it there until we all show up to surround Tgurneu and kill it.”

“Will things go that well? Sounds awfully convenient,” said Fremy.

“I think it’ll work. Even Tgurneu should get upset seeing hundreds of its subordinates getting lit up. That goes double for the wolf and leopard. They won’t be thinking about keeping Tgurneu’s location hidden. They won’t be thinking straight at all. It’s a perfect opportunity to find Tgurneu.”

“Fremy, even if we can’t find Tgurneu, there is still much to be gained. We’ll be able to drastically reduce the army of seven hundred,” Mora pointed out.

“That’s one of the goals here, too. So how about this strategy of mine? Let me hear your thoughts, guys.”

Once Adlet’s explanation was done, Nashetania spoke. “There are just too many uncertainties in this scheme. There’s no guarantee we have an accurate understanding of Tgurneu’s forces, and even if we do, Tgurneu may not necessarily act as you’ve predicted. But even taking this into account, I believe this plan is worth trying.”

“It’s too dangerous. Should we not seek out more reliable methods?” Dozzu asked.

Nashetania replied, “We have no time. A route both safe and certain isn’t available to us in this situation. If you had any other ideas, I might say otherwise, but you don’t, do you?”

“Please don’t worry, Dozzu. L-let’s trust Addy. This is his plan, so I know it’ll work,” said Rolonia.

Dozzu gave a little sigh. It must have decided they had no choice.

“Sorry, Rolonia,” said Adlet, “but this plan isn’t one hundred percent sure to succeed. If it fails, we’ll run. Retreat, find a new strategy, and come for Tgurneu again. By then, we’ll have a better understanding of what’s going on with Tgurneu’s forces anyway, and I know we’ll think of something. And if that fails, too, then we’ll run again and survive until we kill Tgurneu. We’ll do that as many times as it takes.”

Dozzu nodded. The group was gradually leaning further in favor of this plan, but Fremy still wasn’t ready to accept it. The most important part would be left to Dozzu—who might betray them at any time. Mora seemed skeptical, too. She’d agreed with the broad strokes, but like Fremy, she appeared to have

concerns.

That was when a voice among them called out, “Wait.”

“You’re being too loud, Goldof. What if the fiends find us?” chided Adlet.

But Goldof ignored Adlet’s remark and glared at him. “I won’t let you...carry out this plan.”

“How the hell can you say that? You haven’t said a damn word this whole time, and when you finally open your mouth, it’s to complain?”

“No. I...can’t trust...you. It seems clear to me...that Hans isn’t...the seventh... It’s you. You...set Hans up...and next...it’ll be us...”

Fremy was startled. *Why are you saying this now?*

But he’d trusted Hans and suspected Adlet the whole time. He just hadn’t said anything, so Fremy had come to believe he was convinced Adlet was a real Brave.

“Don’t gimme that crap, Goldof,” spat Adlet.

An uneasy air hung over them. Rolonia seemed scared the group would fall apart again.

“What proof do you have? What’s your basis for saying that? Have you seen me talking with fiends? Do I look like I’m talking to Tgurneu?”

“It’s true...there’s...no proof...you’ve been communicating...with Tgurneu. But it’s suspicious...that you thought up...a strategy...so easily. It looks...to me...like you knew how Tgurneu’s forces...were organized...beforehand. That’s why...you could come up with a plan right away.”

“Goldof, that’s nothing more than your subjective opinion,” said Dozzu.

“I won’t let you...carry out...this plan. As long as I...can’t be certain...Adlet isn’t...the seventh...I’ll stop you. By force...if I have to.” Goldof planted himself at the entrance to the cave, spear raised. He was serious. “Fremy...Mora... Rolonia...think about it...one more time. Go over...everything about Adlet... again. There’s sure to be...proof somewhere...that he’s the seventh.”

“I refuse,” said Fremy. “I don’t suspect Adlet anymore. I’m certain he’s

genuinely trying to kill Tgurneu.”

“That’s...just your...subjective opinion.”

Fremy pointed her gun at Goldof. She wasn’t going to shoot—just push him to change his mind. Rolonia cut in between the two to keep them from fighting.

Then Nashetania exhaled a small sigh, patted Fremy’s shoulder, and said, “I have a request, Fremy. Please make me a bomb, about the size of a strawberry. One you can ignite with a thought, please.”

“...?” Fremy was confused. As requested, she made a bomb and handed it over.

Nashetania put the explosive inside her mouth, then stuck her finger down her throat to push it in.

“!” Goldof went pale. He tossed away his spear and grabbed for Nashetania in an attempt to stop her, but the bomb slid down her throat and into her stomach before he could.

Fremy, Adlet, and all the other Braves were shocked, but Goldof and Dozzu were especially so. Goldof was so pale, he looked like he was on the verge of a heart attack. Dozzu was speechless, just opening and closing its mouth.

“Fremy,” said Nashetania, “if Goldof won’t do as he’s told, then please ignite the bomb I just swallowed.”

“Your Highness! Please...vomit it up! Just...what are you doing?!” Goldof rushed to her side.

But Nashetania waved away his hand. “Let go of me, Goldof. If my life is valuable to you, then listen.”

Goldof picked up his spear and pointed it at Fremy. “Dispel...the bomb. If anything...happens...to her...I’ll kill you. I don’t care...what happens...to the world. I’ll...kill...you.”

“Didn’t you hear what I just said?” demanded Nashetania. “I ordered you to obey. I’m telling you not to obstruct the plan. If you fail to grasp this, I *will* have Fremy ignite the bomb.”

“B-but then...you’ll...” Goldof was conflicted.

Mora came to the rescue and said, “Nashetania, vomit up the explosive for now. At this rate, that ploy won’t prevent a falling-out. It’s having the opposite effect.”

“Understood. I suppose there’s no helping it.” Nashetania leaned forward and heaved a few times, then stuck her fingers down her throat to pull out the device and toss it into the back of the cave.

“I’ll say this once more, Goldof: I will absolutely not have you obstructing this plan. You *will* obey Adlet in all matters. You understand what I’ll do if you ignore my instructions, don’t you?” Nashetania glared at him.

Goldof was speechless. He just stood there, unsure what to do.

He was suspicious of Adlet. In Goldof’s view, Adlet must have set up Hans and was conspiring with Nashetania and Dozzu to entrap the Braves.

But if someone was to ask him if he was certain, Goldof would be unable to reply. He couldn’t entirely dispel the worry that perhaps he was the one caught in the enemy’s trap. Perhaps Hans was the seventh after all, trying to take advantage Goldof’s confusion. The cold stares from his allies and Nashetania pierced him, demanding why he couldn’t trust Adlet and making him even more uneasy.

Most importantly, Goldof had to do what Adlet said—or Nashetania would die. Even if she was their enemy, even if she seemed to be trying to trick the Braves, even if it was at the expense the whole world, he had to keep her safe.

“I...understand. I trust...that Adlet is not the seventh...Your Highness.”

“Good,” Nashetania replied.

Fremy was relieved. Now they didn’t have to worry about Goldof interfering with the plan. They’d managed to avert a crisis for the time being.

“Nashetania, even recklessness has its limits. My insides were in a knot there,” said Dozzu.

“That wasn’t reckless. I had to do it. We must defeat Tgurneu now, or we’ll have no chance at victory, either. And everyone here has to combine forces in order for us to win. I’ll do anything to prevent the group from falling apart. Am I

mistaken, Dozzu?”

“...No, you’re right,” Dozzu replied, and with that, a new suspicion arose within Fremy. Why was Nashetania going so far as to risk her life to carry out this strategy? She’d said it was to defeat Tgurneu, but her word couldn’t be trusted. What if Nashetania and Dozzu were going to use Adlet’s plan for some scheme of their own? Fremy couldn’t clear the misgivings from her mind.

“Right, well, let’s get started preparing for the operation. Fremy, you make the gunpowder. Rolonia and Nashetania, can you gather leaves? Mora, keep rewriting those hieroglyphs. We have to finish setting this up before the fiends find us. Hurry,” Adlet ordered, and the allies set into motion.

“I can’t seem to find those Braves. Good grief. They are rather good at hide-and-seek,” Tgurneu muttered in its corner of the forest.

Number eleven asked, “What are they üp to, Cómmander?”

“Isn’t it obvious? They’re clearly putting their heads together to think up a way to defeat me.”

“S-so then, shouldn’t we do sòmething to prévent them...?”

Tgurneu glared at number eleven as if to say *Useless*. “It doesn’t matter what they do. They’re not going to find me with some last-minute scheme.” With that remark, Tgurneu ended the conversation. Peering up at the sky, it said, “Hmph, how long does number two plan to make me wait? How long does a simple investigation take?”

First, Fremy made gunpowder. Using a special technique, she ensured it would continue to exist even if she died—just in case worse came to worst. At the same time, she also made an ignition device so any of the others could blow the gunpowder, too.

Adlet dipped dead leaves in the chemical, then stuck very small amounts of gunpowder to them with adhesive. At a glance, you couldn’t distinguish them from regular fallen leaves. Aside from Mora, the others were discussing the details of the plan as they helped treat the leaves.

“We need a decoy to draw a lot of fiends together and into the range of our fire,” said Adlet. “I think you’re perfect for that role, Mora.”

“Me? Why?”

“I’m positive Tgurneu is being careful around your clairvoyance. It’ll prioritize killing you. You’ll be the best lure.”

“True.”

“But it’s too dangerous for you to do it solo. Goldof, you go with her to defend her.”

“...Understood. I have no choice.” Goldof nodded.

“Mora and Goldof will lure the enemy in, and then we scatter the treated leaves around the area. This part has to be done cautiously, to keep the enemy from getting suspicious,” cautioned Adlet.

“Leave that to me, please. I’ve very good at evading notice and keeping quiet.” Nashetania raised her hand.

“You were my pick anyway. Rolonia, you back her up.”

“O-okay. I’ll do my best.” Rolonia nodded.

“Dozzu and I will be sticking the light gem on the leopard-fiend. You come with us, too, Fremy. It’s too dangerous for you to be alone.”

“Understood,” said Fremy. “I can kill the red number twenty-four, too.”

“I’ve finished rewriting the hieroglyphs,” announced Mora. “If this stake is planted in the ground, it will erect a barrier with about a fifty-five-yard radius. It will only last for twenty minutes or so, and while the barrier can be entered, it cannot be exited. I’ve also added some anchoring hieroglyphs, so once the stake is in the ground, it can’t easily be removed.”

Dozzu took the stake, then deftly stuck it into its mouth and swallowed it. This baffled Fremy, and she wondered where it could have gone inside that tiny body. Next, Mora transferred the ability to see hieroform traces to Adlet.

As they worked on the leaves, their conversation continued. Each nailed down the specifics of what they would be doing and memorized the lay of the land thoroughly.

In case the plan failed or fell apart before it could be completed, they decided

where and how they would retreat as well as where to meet up. Fremy handed each of them firecrackers for communication. She'd made them so that if one popped, the rest would go off at the same time. Now, if one of them sounded the retreat, that message would be communicated to everyone.

Another possibility was that one of their group might stumble across Tgurneu at some point during the operation. For that scenario, Adlet distributed flash grenades. If they found Tgurneu, they would toss their grenade into the air to summon the others and block Tgurneu's escape. Once the others saw the flash grenade, they were to head toward it straightaway.

When the discussion was reaching its final stages, Mora asked, "What will we do about Hans?"

That was a problem. The seventh was bound to act, but it was hard to predict what he would do. He might target Chamo as the only one who trusted him. If that happened, they wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Chamo would just have to protect herself.

Hans might also come after Fremy and Adlet with Chamo on his side, and that possibility was a real concern. Those two were strong enough to go toe-to-toe with at least four of their party.

Adlet decided he would keep two flash grenades on him at all times. If Hans attacked, Adlet would throw both into the air, one after another. Nashetania and Rolonia would be separated from Adlet's group, but if they saw the light of the flash grenade, they were to rush straight to where Adlet's group was. With all five fighting, they were bound to win, even against Hans and Chamo.

But Adlet doubted the fiends would just sit there and watch the battle play out. And even with all five together, it would still be tough.

"It would be a bad idea to kill Chamo or Hans. We should just disable them," said Adlet. Chamo was a real Brave, so killing her was out of the question. But they couldn't kill Hans, either—although the seventh had been sent to them by Tgurneu, the Crest he bore had been created by the Saint of the Single Flower. They still didn't know the particulars of its creation or what powers it held, but chances were high it would be important to the Braves—or even to the Saint of the Single Flower herself. If they killed Hans, that might destroy the seventh

Crest, too.

“Can we manage that? Against those two?” Mora asked.

Adlet answered, “That’s not a question we need to be asking. We just have to do it.”

It was doubtful they’d be able to continue with the operation while they were busy keeping Hans and Chamo in check. In that case, they would have to abandon the plan and retreat westward again.

They would then rework the plan to kill Tgurneu, and before carrying out round two, they’d have to convince Chamo that Hans was the seventh. Could they find evidence to do that? And wouldn’t the power of the Black Barrenbloom kill all the Braves in the meantime? The concerns were endless.

“...Depending on Hans’s course of action, might these preparations all come to naught?” Mora grumbled.

“Even if they do, we can’t just sit here twiddling our thumbs,” Adlet replied.

The Braves finished their preparations, then dug a hole in the ground to hide their bags and went outside. It was incredibly fortunate the fiends hadn’t discovered them while they worked. They set off toward the ruins, the site of their plan, at a run.

Sprinting at the rear of the party, Fremy thought, *This will be a dangerous fight* . There were too many uncertain elements. They shouldn’t even be attempting a plan like this in the first place. They should have been more cautious about their strategy and thoroughly researched the enemy before engaging.

If not for Fremy’s presence and the power of the Black Barrenbloom pushing them to desperation, they would surely have found a more reliable way to kill Tgurneu.

She should never have even considered getting revenge. She should have just quietly killed herself six months ago when Tgurneu had discarded her. She should have let Chamo kill her. If only she had, the Braves would never have been endangered like this.

She was a burden to the Braves of the Six Flowers. No—even worse.

Then, as if he could read her mind, Adlet was there. “Don’t think stupid thoughts, Fremy.” She didn’t say a word, but he grabbed her shoulders and forcefully pulled her close to him. “The Braves need you. Without you, Nashetania would have beaten us. We wouldn’t have been able to get the clues we need to beat Tgurneu. You’re not a burden to us. Not at all.”

“But—”

Adlet cut off her argument. “*I* need you. It’s your presence here that enables me to fight. It’s because you’re here that I can keep from being discouraged, no matter what happens. Listen, you’re supporting the strongest man in the world. That’s a big accomplishment—something no one else can do, right?”

“Adlet...”

“No matter what happens from here on out, I’ll protect you. I’ll make you happy, I swear. The strongest man in the world is with you. Just relax and fight, Fremy.”

Fremy started to say thank you. The words caught in her throat, though, and instead, she shoved Adlet away. “Enough nonsense. You need to prioritize killing Tgurneu over protecting me. We could all die here. There’s no point in trying to protect one ally if the rest of us are dead.”

“...You... Man, you have a heart of ice.” Her reply must have come as a real shock to him.

Fremy regretted it instantly. *I guess I said too much.* But kindness had never been her strong suit. “I’m not saying not to protect me. I’m just telling you that if you have to choose between protecting me and killing Tgurneu, then kill Tgurneu.”

“I’m gonna protect you *and* kill Tgurneu. I have to do both, or there’s no point.” Adlet seemed hurt.

Unable to look at that expression, Fremy said, “Smile.”

“...Huh?”

“You look awful. Smiling no matter what is your thing, isn’t it?”

“Y-yeah.” Adlet gave his usual smile, the one that said there was nothing to fear in all the world.

Seeing it brought Fremy just a touch of gladness. “Smile, no matter what happens. That’s enough for me.”

Adlet nodded deeply.

That was when Fremy caught sight of a bird-fiend through the gaps in the canopy above. She identified it as Tgurneu’s aide, specialist number two. It soared around to fly off eastward.

“We’ve been spotted,” Fremy muttered.

I feel strange , thought Adlet.

His body was light. Strength was brimming up from the pit of his stomach. Right now, he felt like he could beat anyone.

He was in terrible shape, but that didn’t bother him in the slightest.

I’m gonna fight for Fremy , he resolved, and it was enough to tap a wellspring of strength within him. He wasn’t afraid of any of them: not Tgurneu, Hans, Cargikk, Dozzu, or even the Evil God.

Adlet had made up his mind to kill anyone who hurt Fremy—regardless of who it was.

First, Tgurneu. He had to kill Tgurneu, whatever the cost. Even if it had a change of heart and fought to save the world, even if the fiend commander’s death meant the end of everything, Adlet would still kill it without hesitation.

Hans was just as bad. Even if he was under Tgurneu’s control, Adlet wouldn’t forgive him.

Dozzu and Nashetania. He’d kill them, too—because they’d tried to murder Fremy. He’d have to get rid of them once this battle was over. But he couldn’t let that show now.

Chamo and Goldof should also be eliminated. But if they had a change of heart and defended Fremy instead, he’d spare their lives since Fremy had no animosity toward either of them.

As for Rolonia and Mora, he was angry at them, too, because they'd nearly abandoned Fremy once. But Fremy considered them friends. Still, if they betrayed her friendship, Adlet couldn't let them live.

Keeping Fremy safe was everything to Adlet.

He was furious with himself. What he really wanted was to hide her away somewhere safe and go kill Tgurneu with the rest of the Braves. He wanted to keep her far away from their enemies.

But he smothered those feelings and fought anyway. Nowhere was safe. And he really did need Fremy to defeat Tgurneu. Most importantly, Fremy herself wanted to fight it. So that was that.

He'd made up his mind that this plan was absolutely not going to put Fremy in danger.

As long as Fremy was safe, he didn't care what happened. Nothing mattered to him but her.

Number eleven spotted specialist number two flying toward them, and number two swooped down to alight near Tgurneu.

Tgurneu spoke eagerly—not in code but in normal language. “Have you checked on them? How were they? Come on, tell me quick.”

Though bewildered by Tgurneu's zeal, number two replied, “Fröm the sky, I observed Adlet's and Fremy's status. Adlet pulled Fremy to him in an ébrace. She pushed him away, but they cóntinued talking after that.”

Number eleven was confused. What was the value of such a report? What had number two spent all that time investigating?

“I cän't be certain, but...I ëstimate that Adlet and Fremy's relätionship is favorable.”

Number eleven was about to ask what it was talking about when Tgurneu cried out, “I knew it! I knew it had worked out! So Fremy does love Adlet!”

Number eleven was startled. Tgurneu was being terribly loud.

“There's no mistaking it! Fremy loves him! She's fallen for him, completely and sincerely! She's accepted his love and wants to fight for him!”

“I—I don’t knöw about that,” number two said.

“Oh, what was I so worried about? Of course it would happen. I knew this already. Fremy would obviously love him. I made sure of it!”

Number eleven couldn’t understand what had Tgurneu so gleeful. So some dirty half-breed Barrenbloom had fallen in love, so what?

“Well, that’s good. Confirmation that Fremy loves Adlet is the best possible news you could have given me.” Tgurneu cracked a smile that nearly sent chills down number eleven’s spine. “Now I can see it. I can see her face as she suffers in love.”

Meanwhile, Hans and Chamo stood at the center of a pack of fiends. Guarding each other back-to-back, they watched the enemy. The battle had been going on for hours, but even with Chamo’s slave-fiends and Hans’s strength, they had yet to whittle down even five.

“What the heck is with these guys? They’re strong,” said Chamo.

“*Meow-hee!* At this rate, the others are all gonna die,” Hans muttered excitedly, ignoring Chamo’s impatience.



Chapter 2
Hostage

Chapter 2

Hostage

Number two returned to its assignment of spying on the Braves. Watching it go, Tgurneu wondered how many more hours it had to wait before it could witness Fremy's despair.

Just imagining it made Tgurneu want to break into a little jig.

When she learned the whole truth with the Braves' defeat spread out before her, when she found out that Adlet's love for her was false, what would her crying sound like? How would her suffering express itself? What dying scream would accompany her suicide?

Just thinking about it filled Tgurneu with glee. Beholding the spectacle with its own eyes might make it pass out from excitement.

Tgurneu looked up at the sky and thought about its life thus far. Its days had been long and difficult.

Five hundred years ago, Tgurneu had been born into this world an abnormal fiend. The abnormality was not its extremely rare, plant-type body, but its mind.

Every fiend feels loyalty to the Evil God from birth. They come into existence hating humans and willing to devote their entire lives to the Evil God. The lone exception was Tgurneu: It alone felt absolutely no loyalty toward its creator.

If the other fiends had ever discovered how Tgurneu truly felt, they would likely have ostracized and killed it. But fortunately, Tgurneu was intelligent and a skilled actor. It wasn't difficult maintaining a facade of loyalty to the Evil God like other fiends.

About ten years after its birth, Tgurneu acquired intellect on par with a human's. At the age of twenty, it acquired—though to a minute degree—the control-type ability and became capable of manipulating other fiends. Tgurneu was acknowledged and accepted as an excellent fiend. But Tgurneu was empty. And it was lonely.

Fiends prepare for the next awakening of the Evil God by developing their abilities. Obtaining new skills makes them tremble with joy as they consider how they can be used to serve the Evil God. Successfully killing a human gladdens them as they imagine the joy it will bring the Evil God. They all long for the day when the Braves of the Six Flowers are defeated and the Evil God is released; they discuss this dream passionately and often.

But Tgurneu was incapable of feeling that exuberance. The days it spent in the Howling Vilelands were empty and hollow. With every month and every year that passed, Tgurneu's sense of isolation increased. It couldn't share this feeling with anyone. And that was a kind of suffering common to both humans and fiends.

At the time, Tgurneu had agonized over this, wondering why it had been born at all.

Love. When had Tgurneu first discovered that word?

It had been a member of a fiend unit then. Their leader had ordered Tgurneu to go investigate the human realms, as its intelligence and acting ability were held in high esteem. And so Tgurneu controlled a transforming fiend and left the Howling Vilelands. There, Tgurneu learned about the lifestyle of the humans it saw, about human culture, and about the concept called love. The latter held Tgurneu's heart in its thrall.

The fiend studied love with intense dedication. Love was to wish for the happiness of another person, to have a relationship with that person, and to fixate on maintaining it.

Humans loved one another. They attained happiness by loving and being loved. This force made people stronger and stirred the depths of their souls. Sometimes, it would lead them astray. All this Tgurneu understood.

But what did it feel like to love someone? Tgurneu just couldn't fathom it. No matter how much it wished to love someone, it couldn't—not the Evil God, not fiends, and not humans.

Fiends loved the Evil God, and humans loved one another. But Tgurneu couldn't do either.

It was said that love was the one thing that could make people stronger. This was surely the same for fiends—so Tgurneu was the most helpless creature in the world. It was said that only love brought happiness—so Tgurneu was the unhappiest creature of all.

That helplessness tortured Tgurneu. No one knew how it felt inside, and no one showed interest in finding out.

Then Tgurneu found out about a strange fiend.

This fiend would be later named Cargikk. While Cargikk loved the Evil God as a fiend did, like a human would, it also loved other fiends. And so, pretending that it also loved the Evil God and other fiends, Tgurneu made contact with this creature, who had to be the happiest in all the world, including humans and fiends.

Cargikk was simple, straightforward, and having never been suspicious of anyone, it readily believed Tgurneu. It grasped the vines that grew from Tgurneu's body as it cried with joy at having made its first friend.

Tgurneu had approached Cargikk because it had thought this connection might foster an understanding of love within Tgurneu. Tgurneu had hoped it might learn to love someone itself. But no matter what they talked about and no matter how Tgurneu listened to Cargikk's words, it never came to know love. Though Tgurneu understood it as a concept and could grasp its nature, it could never love someone personally. All it got was the name *Tgurneu*.

Eventually, Cargikk gained a new friend. It was the insignificant weakling of a fiend who would later be called Dozzu. Being with Cargikk and Dozzu as they chattered together like friends made Tgurneu jealous. Tgurneu hated them for being so happy—so unaware of Tgurneu's suffering for being unable to love. But Tgurneu never revealed its feelings. The two other fiends thought of Tgurneu as a slippery and evasive character, but they believed in its friendship.

As Tgurneu watched, Cargikk, who had been just an ordinary fiend, and Dozzu, who had been a little weakling at most, rapidly grew stronger. Their devotion to the Evil God and to other fiends had given them new powers. It was practically miraculous.

Tgurneu's desire for love became more and more covetous. Only love would

bring power. Only love could perform miracles. In Tgurneu's mind, this became something like his religious creed, and it came to hate all creatures capable of love.

Even now, Tgurneu could vividly remember that day three hundred years ago, when it had proven its superiority over the second generation of Braves of the Six Flowers.

There had been three surviving Braves: Marlie, the Saint of Blades; Hayuha, the Saint of Time; and Merlania, the Saint of Thunder. Tgurneu had predicted that the three would take advantage of an opening in the fiends' forces to attack the Evil God.

But that moment, a thought had occurred to Tgurneu. *I want to see the fiends wailing in despair.* Half this desire was the hope that their lamentation might lead it to understand. The other half was motivated by revenge, to bring suffering to the fiends it hated so much.

Tgurneu did not share these thoughts with its allies. And just as Tgurneu had predicted, the Braves attacked the Evil God, and with Merlania's strike, the Evil God was sealed away.

Tgurneu's betrayal hadn't enabled the Braves' victory, exactly. Cargikk and Dozzu had been exhausted. With their leaders down, the fiends had never had a chance to win in the first place.

But the Evil God was defeated just as Tgurneu had wanted, and the Howling Vilelands drowned in the moaning of fiends. Listening to their wailing brought Tgurneu an ocean of joy. It had been two hundred years since its birth from the Evil God's body, and now, for the first time in its life, it was feeling happiness. The discouragement and inferiority complex that had filled every inch of its heart vanished, replaced by the roiling sea of joy that came with accomplishing a great feat. It forgot its hatred of the fiends and of humans; instead, it was filled with a sense of godlike superiority.

Tgurneu had always hated itself so much for being incapable of love. But now, it could validate everything about itself. It couldn't acquire love, but it could get something much better.

It could have the pleasure of crushing it.

Thus, Tgurneu had gained its life goal: To see those who wailed over the loss of their beloved.

To see those who suffered over the betrayal of their beloved.

To see those who were forced to suffer in order to protect their beloved.

Tgurneu was uninterested in watching meaningless suffering. They had to suffer *for love* . Merely watching was boring as well. The suffering had to be inflicted by Tgurneu personally.

Tgurneu had seen enough fiends in agony during the second Battle of the Six Braves. And besides, fiends' love was simple; their minds all worked the same way. Seeing the same thing over and over wasn't enough to satisfy Tgurneu's heart, so eventually, its interests shifted elsewhere.

It wanted to see Cargikk suffer. It wanted to see Dozzu in pain. But most of all, it wanted to see human anguish. Their love was completely different from that of simple, dull old fiends.

When Tgurneu crushed their love, it would acquire the ultimate joy, one that no one else could ever taste.

Tgurneu began pursuing its incredibly ambitious dream. To crush love, it would have to acquire incredible strength. Tgurneu was powerless with nothing more than a weak fig as its body and no one it could call a friend. And it couldn't have the power of love, the strongest force in the world—the only thing that could cause miracles.

But Tgurneu figured this wouldn't be a problem. It was certain it could acquire power.

If it couldn't have love itself, then Tgurneu should just control another's. That was all there was to it, right?

Mora was running alone about six miles west of the Temple of Fate with her light gem only just bright enough to illuminate her path.

“Someone, someone, come! I can't escape on my own! ” Mora yelled with her power of mountain echo. She honestly wasn't very confident in her acting ability. But she was satisfied with this line. She was sure it would convince the

fiends that she really was in trouble.

About three hundred and fifty fiends surrounded her, but only a handful were actually attacking her. They formed multiple rings around her to prevent her escape. Blocking their endless attacks with her gauntlets, Mora dashed toward her destination.

She was in a basin that connected three mountains. A great cliff soared upward to the north, while to the east was an easy slope downward. To the south and west were plains, where Mora's powers of clairvoyance wouldn't work.

Dotted the landscape were moss-covered stone buildings. A millennium ago, this had been a populated town. Now, all the buildings were red with the Evil God's toxin. The structures were in various states of disrepair: Some had collapsed over the many centuries, while others still stood. With so much time having passed since the town had lost its residents, it was in total ruin. The place was thick with trees and grass sprouting up through the flagstones. Most of the city had been swallowed by the forest.

“Adlet! Dozzu! That way is blocked by fiends! Circle around from the east!” Mora yelled again with her mountain echo.

“Run north! Stave off the fiends' attacks there! We'll break through their ranks right away and catch up!” Mora saw Adlet yell with her clairvoyance. Just as he'd told her, she ran for the sheer cliff to the north.

A few minutes earlier, the Braves had approached the fiends' command center in an attempt to investigate but had been discovered and forced to retreat. It was then that Mora had inadvertently gotten isolated, and now she was running frantically, unable to convene with the rest of the group—or so it seemed to the enemy. But it was all an act. The real goal was to gather a large number of fiends in this one location, and Mora was just a decoy to that end.

“Ngh!” Mora ran up to the side of the cliff, breaking away from the fiends. But more caught up to her, closing in to attack. Mora guarded too late, and her leg was injured. The wound was shallow, but she dramatically dragged it behind her. She then “failed” to block the following attacks and fell.

“This isn't good!” Mora pulled a stake out from under her robes and thrust it

into the ground. It threw up a no-entry barrier with a range of about fifty-five yards around her. Many of the fiends stopped at the barrier. But the ones closer to her paid it no mind and went for her. It was difficult for her to fend off their strikes while feigning an injury.

That was when Goldof cried, “Mora!”

Mora willed for Goldof alone to be let in while still keeping out the fiends. Goldof slipped through and swept toward her like a gale. “I made it...in time.” He beat back the fiends that attacked her. Once again, Mora was impressed with how he handled his spear.

“Is your wound...light?” Goldof asked.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve been badly hurt. I’ll heal it now, but it will be some time before I’m able to run,” Mora said, loud enough for the fiends to hear. One of them yelled something in code to a messenger hovering overhead.

“You...focus on...your healing. Once you’re ready...we escape. In the meantime...I’ll protect you,” Goldof asserted, fighting off the fiends that had made it inside the barrier.

Crouching near the stake, Mora pretended to continue mending her leg as she observed the situation around them with her clairvoyance. Five fiends were inside with her. Goldof could handle them. About a hundred more were glued around the barrier, attacking it continuously. Farther back, nearly two hundred and fifty enemies encircled the area. They must have seen this as a prime opportunity to eliminate Mora for good.

“Mora...they’re breaking...through the barrier,” said Goldof. A united attack broke through a section of the wall of light, and a few dozen fiends attempted to surge in all at once. Pouring her power into the stake, Mora repaired the defense. She prevented its total collapse but had let in about ten foes. Goldof didn’t even have time to take a breath before facing his new opponents.

“The bärrier—will break! Don’t stöp—attacking!” one of the fiends surrounding them yelled, apparently the leader. Mora pretended to be shaken.

Everything was going according to Adlet’s plan. About half the army was completely engaged with Mora and Goldof.

The area around the mass of fiends was covered in trees. There was a moderate wind blowing from the north, and the air was dry. These were perfect conditions for a conflagration. Now they just had to hold on until the preparations for the fire were complete.

“You filthy louse stay away from me you’re less than pig shit trash! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!”

Spraying curses and invectives, Rolonia attacked the fiends just over half a mile to the south of Mora’s location. Her light gem, fitted into her armor, illuminated the area.

“You’re drawing too much attention, Rolonia! And you’re pushing in too far alone!” Adlet yelled. But she wasn’t listening as she frantically swung her whip.

Rolonia was battling the three hundred and fifty fiends that surrounded Mora and Goldof, but they were fending her off to prevent her from charging in to save Mora. The circle of fiends was so tight, an ant could hardly crawl through. Rolonia and Adlet couldn’t get near the center, and Goldof and Mora couldn’t escape rejoin their allies.

“Rolonia! It’s no use charging them head-on! Pull back for now, please!” Nashetania rushed up to Rolonia, defending her from the enemies about to move in from either side.

“But...w-we have to save Lady Mora. Without her, it’s all over!” With another yell, Rolonia charged in. “Die DIE move your asses! Lady Mora! You bastards maggots it’s your turn to die!”

“Calm down, please, Rolonia!”

Rolonia ignored Nashetania’s attempt to stop her and continued her assault. She tried breaking through the line of fiends with a body blow, but they flung her away and sent her rolling along the ground. The net of fiends around Mora and Goldof didn’t budge an inch.

This was Rolonia’s task from Adlet.

He had told her to rush in headlong in an attempt to save Mora—but not successfully. She should deliberately fail in the attack, then retreat, circle around to another spot, and attack again. Once she failed there, she should attack from another angle again. Rinse and repeat. She would frantically

scramble around the half-mile range circling Mora and draw the fiends' attention.

"This is bad, Rolonia! At this rate, we'll be surrounded!" Nashetania yelled as she guarded Rolonia's back. From the south side, they could hear the heavy footfalls of dozens of fiends.

"Th-then we're running! Please follow me, Nashetania!" Rolonia dashed off westward. Dimming their light gems to avoid detection, they slipped through the lines of trees and hid in the shadows of the smattering of ancient structures.

"Follow them! Kill Rolonia! Kill Nashetania!" They heard the cries of fiends at their backs.

With the ruins and the forest swallowing it, the topography was very complex. There were many places to hide and no shortage of escape routes. It didn't take long for Rolonia and Nashetania behind her to shake off their pursuers.

Once they arrived on the western side of the encirclement, Rolonia screamed loudly. She lit up the area with her light gem again, drawing attention with her shout. "Lady Mora! Goldof! I'll save you now! YAGHyoufiendstheBravesaregonnasplatteryourgutsandyourcoresandstompon themjustfuckingdie!" Again, Rolonia recklessly charged into the horde of fiends. Guarding her back, Nashetania ran after her.

Rolonia's job was to keep the enemy's eyes on her. While she was fighting the fiends, Nashetania was to make preparations for the fire. The plan was for Nashetania to scatter the incendiary leaves Adlet had entrusted to her around the forest. The role was a heavy responsibility. If the fiends spotted her at her task, Tgurneu was sure to quickly recognize their intent. If that happened, then the operation would fall apart.

Rolonia's charge failed to break through the enemy ranks, so she retreated again from the fiends pursuing her. As she ran, she glanced behind her. Was the preparation for the fire going well?

Nashetania noticed Rolonia's glance, and her cheeks twitched up in a smile—a silent *Don't worry*.

With her one arm, Nashetania deftly pulled out a single dry leaf from the bag on her shoulder. Sword still in hand, she held it between her pinkie and ring fingers. And then, when she swung her sword, the leaf disappeared from her hand. Rolonia didn't even know where she'd dropped it. This was partly because the light was dim, making it hard to see—but more because of Nashetania's swift dexterity. It left Rolonia in awe.

Everything was going according to plan. Once again, Rolonia was confident that trusting Adlet was the right choice. He really was the strongest man in the world. No matter what trouble they were in, Addy was sure to find a way.

They heard Mora crying out from inside her barrier. **“Adlet! Fremy! While the enemy's forces are occupied with us, go for Tgurneu! It's not what we planned, but we're left with no choice!”**

Mora's call was part of Adlet's plan, too. Rolonia and Nashetania gave each other a small nod.

You can do it, Addy. Your revenge is almost done , Rolonia told herself, and she charged the enemy again.

Like Rolonia, Fremy was attacking the circle of fiends in an attempt to rescue Mora. But she didn't actually mean to succeed; this was only for show. With Fremy were Adlet and Dozzu, who were also pretending to wage a desperate fight against the fiends.

“Adlet! Fremy! While the enemy's forces are occupied with us, go for Tgurneu! It's not what we planned, but we're left with no choice!”

They heard Mora's mountain echo. Fremy exchanged looks with Adlet.

It seemed everything was proceeding smoothly. Just according to plan, the three left the area.

The wolf-fiend's fake command center was in battle formation about a mile to the southeast from Mora's location, at the central road of the ancient ruins. It was a flat area a little ways off from the mountains, so Mora couldn't study their position with her clairvoyance. About a hundred fiends stood in defensive formation, protecting the wolf-fiend at their center. The leopard-fiend the Braves were after was also in the center, beside the wolf-fiend.

“Hey, Dozzu. Yes, if it isn’t Dozzu! You were close by until just a little while ago, but you ran off so quickly. I was so lonely.” The enemy didn’t attack immediately, and the wolf-fiend spoke to them, imitating Tgurneu. “Why are you with the Braves? Weren’t we friends? Remember? Didn’t we both pray for fiendkind’s happiness together? Abandon those stupid ideas of yours and come fight with me.” The wolf-fiend never let its impersonation falter.

“I’m ashamed I ever called you a friend, Tgurneu.” Dozzu pretended to believe the wolf-fiend’s ruse.

“You misunderstand me. I am concerned with the happiness of fiendkind, in my own way.”

“There’s no use in discussing this with you. And there’s no place for you in the world of coexistence I dream of!” Dozzu charged toward the wolf.

Adlet yelled, “Me and Dozzu will go for Tgurneu! Fremy, you take down the fiends in the air!”

Fremy nodded. Mora and Goldof were undertaking a dangerous task, while Rolonia and Nashetania also played a difficult role. *I can’t afford to screw this up*, she thought as she focused her sights on the aerial fiends beyond the gaps in the canopy.

“Hmm...what do we do about this?” Tgurneu muttered as it received reports from number twenty-four. It was south of the ruins, waiting about three miles away from Mora.

The area was quiet. The great tumult of the Braves’ and fiends’ battle didn’t reach this far. Examining the map, Tgurneu leisurely continued its attempts to determine what the Braves’ objective might be.

Fremy loved Adlet. Now that Tgurneu had confirmed this most important fact, it could focus fully on the fight with the Braves.

Though Tgurneu knew that the Braves had hardly any hope of turning the tables, it still couldn’t let its guard down. If it died, it would never get to see Fremy’s expression of love-inspired suffering.

“Adlet, Fremy, and Dozzu are charging the fake command enter. And Rolonia and Nashetania are trying to save Mora...apparently.” With a pen, Tgurneu

recorded the Braves' locations on a map. Every single one of them was far from Tgurneu. From what the wolf-fiend had reported of their situation, it seemed they had not even considered the possibility that Tgurneu was off in hiding.

The Braves believed Tgurneu was in the fake command center and were trying to isolate that formation and use the opportunity to kill the wolf-fiend. But Mora had been separated from the group and was subsequently discovered, and now their plan was falling apart. This was what Tgurneu was forced to assume, based on the wolf-fiend's report.

But, pen in hand, Tgurneu fell silent.

"...Cómmander Tgurneu." Tgurneu realized number twenty-four was speaking. "The wölf-fiend seeks your örders."

Its thoughts interrupted, Tgurneu sighed. Left with no choice, it relayed instructions to the wolf-fiend through number twenty-four. "<Continue using those three hundred and fifty fiends to surround Mora. All you have to do is keep her from escaping. You remain on standby where you are to fight Adlet's group of three. Of the remaining troops, use a hundred to keep Rolonia and Nashetania in check. With the final hundred, restrain Adlet, Fremy, and Dozzu.>"

"<Very well, Cómmander,>" the wolf-fiend said through number twenty-four.

"<You don't have to fight them seriously. There's no need to push yourself to kill them.>"

"<Is that äll we must do?>" the wolf-fiend inquired.

Tgurneu was a little irritated. *It's all you're capable of, isn't it? You can't possibly believe you're strong enough to defeat the Braves?*

"<Of course, I will be making my move, as well,>" Tgurneu said, surveying the area. "Number thirteen." One fiend from among the fifty or so nearby slithered to Tgurneu's feet in the form of a short, fat snake. "Can you use your ability here?"

The snake-fiend—specialist number thirteen—spent some time turning its head right and left as if sounding something out. "...Ït is...pössi...ble," number thirteen replied in an extremely faltering manner.

“How long will it take for your ability to activate?”

“Ä...bout...two hour...änd...hälf.”

Like the other specialists, number thirteen had, under Tgurneu’s orders, evolved itself over the course of centuries in order to acquire a new ability. It had exhausted all its strength in order to achieve this. As a result, even its intelligence and ability to speak had degenerated. But that had made its power immense.

“About two and a half hours, hmm? Good, get prepared. Cover the whole area of the ruins. Turn these six square miles into hell.”

“Ünd...ér...stood...Cóm...mänder.” Before even finishing its reply, number thirteen left Tgurneu’s side.

Number thirteen’s ability enabled it to execute a large-scale attack over a wide area. No other fiend under Tgurneu’s command could do so much damage, and the Braves of previous generations wouldn’t have ever experienced an attack on this scale, either.

Tgurneu told the wolf-fiend, “<I’ve sent out number thirteen. The Braves should all be dead in two and a half hours. You understand, don’t you, wolf? Do not allow Adlet or Fremy to die, under any circumstances. Be sure to prepare a means to ensure their safety.>”

“<Undérstood. We’ve mäde every preparation to keep them säfe. We can manage number thirteen’s ábility just fine.>”

“<Of course you have.>”

Contact with the wolf-fiend cut off there. Adlet, Fremy, or Dozzu must have been attacking the fake command center. Tgurneu wasn’t concerned for the wolf-fiend but rather relieved. Now it could be spared having its thoughts interrupted.

“Now then, what to do? Can I defeat the Braves now? Or...?” Tgurneu muttered quietly.

Fremy, Adlet, and Dozzu continued their fierce battle. They were up against the fiends of the fake command center, about a hundred in close formation.

There were also several free-roaming units of fiends coming to attack them.

“Adlet, back me up, please!” Dozzu cried as it fired lightning at the fake command center, while Adlet joined in with all the tools at his disposal. Fremy guarded their backs as she shot down the aerial fiends overhead.

“Damn it, we can’t maintain the offensive! Run!” Adlet yelled. Before they became entirely surrounded, Fremy ran for a spot where enemy forces were thin. Adlet blinded the enemies with a smoke grenade, and Fremy held them back with her bombs as they ran.

“Ha-ha! Do you understand now that it’s no use? What can just the three of you accomplish?” The wolf-fiend desperately clung to its long-exposed ruse.

Three against two hundred, they charged in and then retreated, over and over. It was no easy task. But the lush treetops hid them from any eyes in the sky, and the darkness of night and complex terrain prevented fiends on the ground from discovering them. Without these advantages, they would have been cornered and slaughtered in a flash.

“...We must finish this before daybreak,” said Dozzu. They probably had about two hours. Carrying out the strategy would become difficult under morning light. The super-flammable leaves Nashetania had spread were likely to be found, too.

“No problem. We’ll finish this up before then,” said Adlet. But the most important step of their plan was yet to be accomplished: attaching the mud-covered light gem to the leopard-fiend. This had to be done if they were going to pursue their target when it was dispatched as a messenger.

“Are things going all right with you?” Fremy asked.

“Relax, we’re still at the setup stage. You’ll see results soon enough,” Adlet replied.

Fremy nodded. If Adlet said so, then it would be fast. She had her job to do, too: shooting down the aerial messengers to cut off contact between Tgurneu and the wolf.

A fiend in the sky shrieked, and Fremy instantly fired at it, her hands moving too fast for the eye to see. With nothing but sound as her guide, Fremy struck

true and brought down Tgurneu's aide, specialist number two. Now there were just seven fiends left.

"They're coming from the left. We have to run," said Fremy.

They fled right, tramping through the woods as loudly as they could. Then, in the shadows of the ruins, they stopped and waited for the group of fiends that came chasing after them to go past and ran back the way they'd come.

Setup was going well. At this rate, they could win.

"If the fight continues like this, I'm certain they'll find me," Tgurneu murmured. It was clear the Braves were not simply attacking the wolf-fiend or scampering about in an attempt to save Mora. Though it may have looked that way superficially, they were, in fact, preparing to kill Tgurneu.

"Wh-why? The Braves have come nowhere close to you, Commander. And the one who requires the most caution, Mora, is pinned. They could never find you," said number eleven.

"Indeed. I believe it's impossible for the Braves to find me, too, but that will pose no problem for them. They're sure to turn that impossibility into a possibility. I can tell, you know," Tgurneu said, glaring at number eleven. "Why? Because I believe in the power of love."

Number eleven stared back blankly.

As if to say *You could never understand*, Tgurneu sighed.

Love was the strongest force in the world, the only one that could generate miracles, and only love would bring about victory—so Tgurneu believed. It was precisely because Tgurneu could not know love that it knew the extent of its power.

Mora loved her husband and her daughter. Goldof loved Nashetania. Rolonia—Adlet and her Saint allies. Chamo loved her parents.

And most of all, Fremy loved Adlet, and he, her. They were trying to kill Tgurneu to protect one another. So no matter how Tgurneu bolstered its defenses, the power of love was sure to break through.

The greatness of love was what gave value to its demise. Destroying the

strongest and most wonderful thing in the world was where Tgurneu founds its pleasure.

“...Yes, love is sure to conjure a miracle.”

Fremy attacked the fake command center once more, drawing their attention with smoke grenades and whittling them down with her bombs to break holes in their defenses.

The lower-ranking fiends pressed close together like a wall to protect the wolf. From behind, the wolf watched over the fight calmly. Beside it were the red number twenty-four and the leopard-fiend, and Adlet and Dozzu were targeting those two. Fremy defended her allies from the rear with her weapon at the ready.

Adlet pulled some vials from one of his pouches, wedging them between his fingers to throw them at the tight cluster of fiends. They burst in the air, raining down a sticky white liquid that clung to the creatures' bodies. What Adlet had doused them in was a special adhesive mucus. Once it was stuck on you, it was hard to get off. Adlet had also explained to the others beforehand that it restricted movement, and the effect would last for some time.

“Thank you for the help!” Dozzu cried as it fired off a lightning strike. Unable to block it, several fiends were sizzled. Without missing a beat, Fremy wove through them, gun blazing.

“You can't kill me using something like that, Fremy.” The wolf-fiend dodged her bullets with ease. “Stop this already. How long are you going to continue this meaningless fight?” it asked.

Ignoring it, Adlet threw mucus vials at the wolf-fiend, but it flicked them far away with its tentacles.

One of the bottles exploded in the air, though, splashing a little bit of the mucus onto the leopard-fiend. Fremy was relieved—the plan had worked. Getting the mucus on the leopard had been the goal of this attack.

It was only a tiny bit, not enough to hinder nor concern the fiend, but if they stuck the light gem onto that mucus, it wouldn't come off easily. Now Adlet just had to nonchalantly approach the leopard-fiend and attach the light gem, and

their objective would be complete.

But they couldn't linger here long. They had to keep moving, or they wouldn't be able to leave.

"It's no use! Just the mucus isn't gonna stop 'em! We'll come back for another pass!" Adlet yelled. The three pulled back for the time being and made to flee from the fiend formation again.

The fiends of the fake command center pursued them in an attempt to cut off their retreat. A fiend came swooping down on Fremy from above the canopy.

She was about to shoot it down when the wolf-fiend yelled, "Everyone, stop fighting!" Its minions chasing them froze.

The unexpected change in attitude surprised Fremy, and she turned. Adlet and Dozzu stopped, too, watching to see where this would go.

"There's no more reason to hide it. Fremy, you are the Black Barrenbloom, the secret weapon sent by me to kill the Braves of the Six Flowers." They knew it was just the wolf-fiend pretending to be Tgurneu, but still, the real Tgurneu was behind this. Fremy wondered just what it had planned.

"My idea was to send you, the Black Barrenbloom, to the Braves and have the seventh protect you. But my plan has failed. Your identity has been exposed. Your role...is done now."

"What are you trying to say?" Fremy asked without thinking.

"I'm sure you must hate me. Of course you would. It's true that I hurt you. But I had no choice. I had to make you a real Brave, so I had to make you hate all fiends. I didn't really want to hurt you."

"...Shut up." Rage welled up from the pit of her stomach—at Tgurneu, who had hurt her so much, who had used her so utterly at its whims and now claimed that it'd had no choice. Even knowing that what stood before them was just a fiend pretending to be Tgurneu, it was unforgivable.

"If we continue fighting like this, I'll be forced to kill you. But I don't want that. You've worked hard and served me better than anyone. You've gone through more suffering for my sake than any other fiend. Why would I want to kill

someone like that?

“Leave the Braves’ side. Come back to me—to where you really belong.”

“How can you say that now...?” Fremy had made up her mind to ignore anything the wolf-fiend said, but the rage boiling over in her now would not allow that.

When she raised her gun, Adlet said, “Don’t listen to it! We’re running!”

“...I’m sorry.” Using her bombs to hold the enemies back, Fremy ran weaving through the ruins. From behind, she could hear the impatient call of the wolf-fiend. “Don’t ally yourself with the humans anymore, Fremy! That’s not going to make you happy! My subordinates actually thought of you as a comrade! They were all just pretending to hate you because I ordered it!” The wolf-fiend kept shouting. “Are you going to kill the friends who care for you?!”

“I told you to shut up!” Fremy threw a bomb at the wolf, but the other fiends shielded their leader. Some died, and the blast flung their bodies back. Until a moment ago, she’d thought nothing of their deaths. But now, it made Fremy turn away.

“Are you okay, Fremy?” Adlet looked at her with concern.

Do I look that awful? Fremy wondered. “I’m all right. I’m not going to have a change of heart because of that thing’s wheedling. Not after we’ve come so far,” Fremy said firmly. She was trying to shake off her hesitation by saying it out loud.

Fremy kept fighting after that, but the fiends stopped attacking her. Instead, they all started calling out to her, begging her to come back.

A fiend that had, long ago, jeered at her and called her a half-breed, said, “I’m sorry, Fremy. I had the wrong idea about you. I—” Before it could finish speaking, Fremy shot it in the face.

A fiend that had once despised and tormented her family pleaded, “Fremy, I have to apologize to y—” Before it could finish, Fremy blasted it to bits with a bomb.

“I was—under orders. To hurt you. So I did—” said a fiend from above. This

one had tried to devour Fremy when she was a child. She shredded its wings with her bullets without a second thought.

Don't worry about it , Fremy told herself. Tgurneu was just telling her what she wanted to hear in an attempt to deceive her.

"Stop it! Don't kill any more of our friends! Why do you side with the humans? They won't accept—"

Without a word, Fremy fired again and again, silencing every fiend that stepped forward to speak to her.

Not long ago, she might have considered betraying the Braves.

Since that day six months ago when Tgurneu and her family had discarded her, Fremy had constantly wished that it was just another part of Tgurneu's plan. She'd been waiting for the fiends to tell her *I was only pretending to have abandoned you. I actually did care about you* .

Even knowing they were lying, even knowing their kindness was false, she might have accepted their words.

"Fremy, I would hate to think..." Dozzu trailed off.

"Relax, Dozzu. I am absolutely not going to betray you," Fremy said flatly. Bearing the pain in her heart, she kept on firing.

It's strange , she mused. How could she so easily spurn their pleas for her surrender? What was different about her now compared to then? Adlet's face rose in her mind. She recalled how he'd kept on fighting to protect her in the Temple of Fate, even when she'd been trying to shoot him.

She shook her head, driving out any distractions. This wasn't the time to be thinking about that.

The fiends were still calling out to Fremy, but they seemed to be gradually giving up, as fewer and fewer tried to engage with her. But it was clear they weren't going to kill her. They were merciless when they attacked the others, but when they came after her, they aimed for the gun in her hand or her limbs.

Then, one of the aerial fiends shrieked loudly enough to be heard a few miles around. Not in code but a language even Fremy could understand. "Where are

you? What are you doing, seventh?! You don't mean to betray us for the Braves, do you?! Betrayal will not be forgiven! If you reveal even part of the truth to the Braves, punishment from Commander Tgurneu will be instantaneous!" The aerial fiend continued, "Protect Commander Tgurneu! Prevent the Braves' attacks and kill them all! You should understand that if by any chance something happens to Commander Tgurneu, your loved one will die!"

It must have been talking to Hans. Fremy ruthlessly shot down the distant fiend.

"That could be a lie—Tgurneu's attempt to confuse us. Ignore it," warned Adlet.

Still, what was Hans doing? Fremy was curious but doubted worrying about that now would bring her any answers.

"Why are you fighting, Fremy? Can't you hear your friends' voices?!" The wolf-fiend was still yelling at Fremy, coaxing her to surrender. "If you must do this, if you absolutely do mean to fight, then I really will have to kill you!" The wolf-fiend said this over and over. Fremy ignored it and continued undeterred.

Around twenty minutes after the fiends had begun begging for her surrender, she was lurking in the shadows of the ruins with Adlet and Dozzu, about to launch a surprise attack on the fake command center.

"...?" Adlet's head swiveled around, as if he'd noticed something. Fremy was about to ask what had happened.

Then...

Agony pierced her chest. She felt her throat tearing and blood flowing down into her lungs. She covered her mouth, but blood spurted out from between her fingers.

"!"

They were hiding from pursuit. She couldn't cough now. She forced herself to smother any noise, swallowing the blood about to spill from her mouth. Even in the darkness, she could tell Adlet's face had gone pale.

She scanned the area. She could have sworn there hadn't been any fiends nearby. She had no idea where the attack had come from. Adlet and Dozzu were safe. There wasn't even any sign that they were in pain. The only one under attack was her.

"Fremy!" Adlet was so upset, she felt sorry for him. He grabbed her shoulder to support her, but she warned him to be quiet.

Fremy put some medicine Mora had given her into her mouth to stop the bleeding. Mora had told her it was a special drug made by Torleau, the Saint of Medicine. She could feel the bleeding in her throat stop. It hurt terribly, but it seemed she wasn't about to die on the spot.

She spread open her cloak to examine her chest. Adlet and Dozzu took a look, too. She found a strange mark there. It was red and thin as thread—in the shape of dozens of twisted, concentric circles. She'd never seen the eerie mark before. There had been nothing on her chest until just a moment ago.

"What...is this?" Fremy stroked the red pattern. As she touched it, the pain gradually receded.

Adlet was still pale, his lips trembling. He couldn't say a word.

That was when, from afar, they heard the wolf-fiend say, "I advise you one more time, Fremy: If you continue to fight, you'll die. If you don't want to die, return to me."

With those words, finally, Fremy understood what had happened to her. "So Tgurneu implanted a parasite or something inside my chest beforehand in case I ever got in its way. This must mean it's been activated." When had Tgurneu implanted a parasite? There was no point in speculating. Tgurneu would have had any number of opportunities. It had raised her from birth; it would simply have had to implant it into her as a baby. "...So what Tgurneu means to say is that if I continue to fight now, I'll die. And if I surrender, I'll be saved?"

"If that's the intention, that's rather strange," said Dozzu. "Why didn't Tgurneu use it before?"

Dozzu was right. Hans had tried to kill her to make use of the Black Barrenbloom's transfer ability. But now, Tgurneu was calling for her surrender,

and the fiends were holding back in their attacks on her. And this implant in her chest hadn't been utilized up until now. Though Hans and Tgurneu were supposed to be allies, their behavior didn't line up.

"Tgurneu must believe that if it threatens me, I'll surrender. It figures that having me as an ally would make the fight easier than just killing me," Fremy said. "Tgurneu thinks so little of me. I'll never surrender. I'll keep fighting until I die."

Still shaken, Adlet said in a daze, "We're meeting up with Rolonia...and with Mora. We have to treat your chest."

"What? Don't be ridiculous!" Fremy shot back. Both had important jobs to do. They couldn't interrupt the plan.

"But I made up my mind I'd keep you safe!"

"Stop." Fremy grabbed Adlet's wrist and yanked it away from her shoulder. Looking him in the eye, she said, "We should continue with the plan. It doesn't look like I'm going to die right away. We just have to kill Tgurneu before I do. We can heal me afterward." Adlet seemed ready to collapse from distress.

"Either way, we must kill Tgurneu, or we'll all die. We have no choice now but to focus on Tgurneu's defeat." As Dozzu spoke, the three dashed off.

Adlet was still deep in thought, his face pale. He looked so bad, Fremy was unsure whether he could continue fighting. Adlet's job was to stick the light gem onto the leopard-fiend, but he didn't seem capable of that right now.

"Hand me that light gem, Adlet. I can't leave it to you at the moment." Fremy held her hand out to him as they ran. If Adlet couldn't, then she had no choice but to handle it herself. Adlet shook his head, though, apparently indicating he was all right.

"Fremy! Come back to us! We won't give up—trying to convince you!" a fiend yelled from far away. Fremy scowled. How long did they mean to continue this pointless exercise? Did they not understand that she was not going to be won over?

They continued setting up the plan. Adlet and Dozzu charged the fake command center again, and as Fremy provided backup, she was also eliminating

the fliers. Of the fourteen in the air, she killed twelve. For the remaining two, she fired not bullets but gunpowder that stuck to their wings. It wasn't enough to kill them, but it was enough to hamper their ability to fly. Her job was done for now.

Fremy had made a firecracker earlier. If this firecracker was set off, or if Fremy willed it, the gunpowder she'd stuck onto the fiends' wings would explode. She'd made the trigger device just in case something happened to her during their preparations.

Adlet ordered a retreat, and Fremy ran, obstructing pursuit with her bombs. The fiends didn't follow them far, and before long, the chase was over.

"...I'll give this to you, Adlet," Fremy said, handing him the firecracker. Now, as long as either she or Adlet was safe, they could carry out their strategy. "And on your end?" she asked, and Adlet gave a little nod to confirm he'd managed to stick the light gem on the leopard during the chaotic battle. Fremy didn't even know when he'd pulled it off, but it meant this trio's preparations were complete.

Now it was just Nashetania and Rolonia. Once those two were done lacing the forest with their leaves, they could follow through to the end game.

Would they succeed? Could they kill Tgurneu? They didn't know. Fremy knew only one thing: She could never let Tgurneu live—for her own sake—and for her allies'.

But most of all, for Adlet.

The wolf-fiend addressed Tgurneu, who was waiting in a corner of the ruins. "<Cómmander Tgurneu, it seems Fremy won't sürrender. In fact, I believe she's bécome even more détermined to kill us. Is this all right?>"

Tgurneu wondered what on earth this creature was talking about.

Then it realized. Oh yes, it hadn't told the wolf-fiend its strategy. Tgurneu had simply ordered it to call for her surrender. "<If you're concerned about victory, it's already achieved.>" Tgurneu couldn't see the face of the wolf-fiend but imagined its mouth had to be hanging open. "<Our battle with the Braves of the Six Flowers is already over. I didn't even have to mobilize number thirteen. The

Braves will all be dead before dawn, and we can finish off Dozzu and Nashetania, too. All that's left now is to pluck the fruit of victory.>"

"<B-but...>"

"<Listen, wolf-fiend. Love is sure to bring about a miracle. And the miracles of love are always on my side,>" Tgurneu said, then cut off the conversation. It was in such a pleasant mood, for once, and didn't want to be interrupted with tedious drivel. Tgurneu quietly continued awaiting reports of its victory.

Now done with his preparations for their plan, Adlet ran through the forest with Fremy and Dozzu. They were waiting for Nashetania and Rolonia to finish their task with the dead leaves. In his heart, Adlet lamented *I'm sorry, Fremy* .

He was going to put her in danger. He was going to make her suffer.

I know I swore I would protect you with my life and make you happy, but I'm going to end up hurting you anyway.

Strongest man in the world—ha. How foolish he'd been, babbling on about how he'd give his life to keep her safe. He felt so worthless, he was on the verge of tears.

But he held them back. He firmed his resolve to make it through the battle that was about to begin.

He had to protect Tgurneu.

And he had to kill all the Braves but Fremy.

Ever since Tgurneu had first hit on the idea of acquiring the power to control love, it had continued evolving with that goal in mind. In a mere hundred years, Tgurneu had become capable of completely controlling the love of one human, which was impossibly fast by the standards of fiend common sense.

Tgurneu was not interested in controlling the love of fiends. That couldn't cause miracles. In fact, the fiends had already lost to the Braves of the Six Flowers twice despite their deep love for the Evil God. Tgurneu had concluded that the love of fiends lacked a necessary ingredient for miracles.

Tgurneu was certain its ability to control love was invincible. This very power had enabled Tgurneu to realize a number of impossible goals. It had put the

Saint of the Single Flower under its control and enabled it to learn strictly hidden secrets, such as the true nature of the Evil God and the Saint of the Single Flower. It had stolen the seventh crest and absorbed the Saint of the Single Flower's remaining powers. No one had ever imagined that the Saint of the Single Flower, who had saved the world and continued to protect it, would surrender to a mere fiend—not humans, not fiends, and not even the Saint of the Single Flower herself.

But Tgurneu had made some miscalculations, too. At first, it had thought that once it had the Saint of the Single Flower in its grasp, the game would be over—that it could undo the seal on the Evil God at its leisure. Tgurneu had believed that with control over the Saint of the Single Flower, the Braves' source of power, the Braves wouldn't even be an issue.

But the Saint of the Single Flower had designed all her hieroforms to operate automatically with no connection to her own will. Even if the Saint desired it, she couldn't undo the seal on the Evil God. She couldn't prevent the appearance of the Braves of the Six Flowers; neither did she decide who was chosen. She wouldn't even *know* who would be chosen. And the Saint of the Single Flower had exhausted her powers, ending up an empty shell, meaning Tgurneu was unable to make her kill the Braves, either.

Even after acquiring the power of the Saint of the Single Flower, in the end, Tgurneu was still forced to fight the Six Braves.

Even so, Tgurneu had acquired a fearsome weapon—the power he had wrung from the the Saint of the Single Flower's husk and the seventh crest, which she herself had created in secret. Tgurneu had also acquired the right to decide who would receive the seventh crest—and when to activate its hidden ability.

On its own, the seventh crest had no powers that could kill the Braves. The power in the crest was completely useless to Tgurneu, but there was still a way to use the crest itself. Tgurneu just had to give it to someone who would be its pawn and then slip that person in among the Braves.

What's more, with the power Tgurneu had stolen from the Saint of the Single Flower, it had created the Black Barrenbloom. But the amount of power acquired was very slight, and the completed Black Barrenbloom would be

insufficient to kill the Braves with perfect certainty.

So Tgurneu had to rack its brain. If it was to use the Black Barrenbloom effectively, to keep it safe, it needed someone strong to protect it, no matter what. Someone stronger than anyone, more trustworthy than anyone, and also someone Tgurneu could control as it pleased—that was the puppet Tgurneu needed.

Tgurneu believed that, in all things, one must take the time to prepare thoroughly before carrying out the task. So Tgurneu began first by creating the environment where the seventh would be raised.

What caught its eye was a great trader who lived in Gwenvaella, Atreau Spiker. He did scientific research, with a wealth of capital backing him, and used the results in his business. He'd inherited some assets at the age of twenty, and in ten years, he'd multiplied that sum dozens of times over.

Using its subordinates, Tgurneu slaughtered Atreau's whole family to make him loathe fiends. Subsequently, Atreau made up his mind to dedicate the rest of his life and fortune to revenge.

The method Atreau chose to accomplish this was the development of weapons that could kill fiends effectively. It was exactly the sort of idea an excellent scholar and rationalist like him would devise. This, too, was per Tgurneu's expectations.

Next, Tgurneu taught Atreau that fiends lurked in hiding throughout human society. It made him paranoid and convinced him the fiends were trying to steal his research. And so, just as Tgurneu had predicted, Atreau decided to isolate himself in the wilderness to carry out his research on killing fiends alone.

Atreau spared no expense, drawing upon his great fortune to gather information about fiends from all over the world. He received shipments of fiend corpses and studied fiends that Tgurneu had sent into the human realms, as well as those of Dozzu's comrades that had had the misfortune to die.

And so, Atreau came up with weapons for fighting fiends and then polished the technology without ever knowing it was all part of Tgurneu's design.

Originally, Atreau planned to be a Brave of the Six Flowers himself. There

would be no point if he didn't exact his revenge with his own two hands. But the Evil God didn't awaken, and Atreau grew old before the day of the great battle ever dawned. Eventually, he came to consider choosing a successor. He gathered young hopefuls from all over and gave them his secret tools, teaching them everything about his craft.

Before taking on these young apprentices, he would investigate them thoroughly. He had paid spies to look into their backgrounds. With the help of the Saint of Words, he made sure they weren't thieves come to steal his handiwork before he made them apprentices.

Of course, none of the young people Atreau had made his apprentices were any of Tgurneu's. They were all fine people with sincere aspirations of becoming Braves of the Six Flowers and risking their lives to protect the world. There was no need for Tgurneu to play the odds and send Atreau a lackey. All Tgurneu had to do was take an apprentice Atreau had raised and put him under its control later.

Tgurneu sent its agents onto the mountain where Atreau lived and had them carefully watch what happened there. Then, Tgurneu considered which of the apprentices Atreau had raised was best suited to make the seventh.

Once, Tgurneu had been asked why it had spent so much effort on this. Specialist number two, as well as the three-winged fiend Tgurneu had used as its body, both knew all about Tgurneu's plans, and both found the choice baffling.

There was no need to go to the trouble of raising a powerful individual to protect the Black Barrenbloom, they had said. Any number of talented warriors or Saints with great powers would present themselves later on. So Tgurneu should just choose someone suitable from among those and put them in its thrall with its power over love.

They didn't understand. The cultivation of Atreau Spiker had been in preparation for the inevitable day of the final battle. Tgurneu had needed fifty years to play the winning move that would bring about its victory.

That plan, orchestrated over the course of fifty years, was finally about to come to fruition—by means of Adlet Mayer, the strongest man in the world,

whom Tgurneu had chosen.

Tgurneu reminisced about a rare circumstance forty years ago, when a fiend had second-guessed it—the three-winged fiend, whose body Tgurneu had appropriated.

“Why Adlet Mäyer?” the three-winged fiend had demanded. It was unusual for it to oppose Tgurneu so firmly. It even claimed that if Tgurneu could not provide a convincing explanation, it would refuse to serve as its body.

The three-winged fiend had wondered: Why not Chamo Rosso? Why not Goldof Auora? Why choose Adlet as the seventh, when he didn’t even compare in talent or ability? Adlet was even the weakest among the apprentices Atreau had accepted. Even if Atreau was necessary for the plan, Tgurneu could simply have pulled some strings within the temple or the Kingdom of Piena to maneuver either Chamo or Goldof into becoming his apprentice.

With a sigh, Tgurneu had replied, “You don’t get it. I believe Adlet is far greater than either of them. I know he has something neither Goldof nor Chamo have. I know he can make the plan I’ve envisioned a reality. No matter what anyone says, I will choose Adlet. He’s the one I’ve been waiting for.”

In its mind, Tgurneu crowed to the now-deceased three-winged fiend: *I was right* .

About thirty minutes before the mark appeared on Fremy’s chest, Tgurneu had ordered the wolf-fiend to win her over, to tell her that all the fiends actually thought of her as one of them.

Of course, Tgurneu didn’t love her, not even in the slightest, though she was far from unique in that regard. And the fiends had never accepted Fremy. She was nothing more than a half-breed after all.

Fremy would understand that, too. Hating Tgurneu and loving Adlet as she did, she would never agree to surrender. Tgurneu had an ulterior motive in mind when giving the order.

On the southern edge of the ruins, Tgurneu spent some time just waiting. There was no need for impatience.

Voices could faintly be heard from far away. One aerial fiend’s call reached

Tgurneu's ears. "Listen, Fremy. I was—under orders. To hurt you." It seemed it was trying to win Fremy over, just as it had been told.

"Oh, it sounds like we're in full swing," said Tgurneu. "Ah-ha-ha! What insincere nonsense is this?"

"So I did—" The aerial fiend's voice was cut off.

"Oh, it was shot down. What a fool." Tgurneu smiled. After that, Tgurneu gave the wolf-fiend instructions to deliver to the seventh via the fliers. It wasn't long before it was done.

A few more minutes of waiting, and Tgurneu muttered, "...I suppose it's about the right time." It released its host from its control and removed its fig-shaped form from the fiend's stomach. It opened its mouth—meaning a big crack opened in the fig—revealing lips and teeth. Tgurneu stuck its tongue out all the way, and a single purplish-red flower petal appeared on the tip.

Adlet was dashing haphazardly through the ruins. He'd gained some distance from his pursuers, looking for his opportunity to take the fake command center by surprise again and stick the light gem on the leopard-fiend.

"Wait, Fremy! Don't ally yourself with the humans!"

"Being on their side is going to get you killed!" She could hear the fiends' voices here and there. They had been calling for her surrender for about fifteen minutes now.

Adlet said to her, "You get that they're not actually concerned about you, right, Fremy? They just want to use you."

"You don't have to tell me," Fremy replied. But Adlet's ears didn't miss the trembling in her voice. She was rattled. Tgurneu must have wanted to attack her emotionally to make her screw up.

Tgurneu always has been the worst kind of heel, Adlet thought, hating Tgurneu all over again.

"...Yes, there's no way the fiends could care about me," Fremy muttered as if trying to reassure herself.

Abruptly, Adlet wondered—though it was true Tgurneu was the worst kind of

heel, was it the case there really wasn't one shred of affection in its heart? Fremy had said the fiends all hated her. But did they all really loathe her? Some of them might actually care for her, in their heart of hearts.

Just like the white lizard-fiend that died to protect her.

The thought struck him that maybe Fremy would be happier if she returned to the fiends, but he shook his head, tossing it from his mind. Fremy hated Tgurneu. She had sworn to keep fighting as long as it lived. Even if there were some fiends out there who did care for Fremy, that didn't matter. Adlet would kill Tgurneu and defeat the Evil God. That was the only way to make Fremy happy.

Above their heads, an aerial fiend was yelling—not at Fremy, but at the seventh...Hans. “Where äre you? What are you döing, seventh?! You don't mean to bét-ray us for the Braves, do you?! Betrayal will not be fórgiven! If you réveal even part of the truth to the Braves, pünishment from Cómmander Tgurneu will be instantaneous!” The aerial fiend continued, “Prótect Cómmander Tgurneu! Prévent the Braves' attacks and kill them all! You should understánd that if by any chånce something happens to Cómmander Tgurneu, your loved one will die!”

So Tgurneu doesn't know where Hans is, either? Adlet thought. Had Chamo gotten him, or had he concluded the situation was disadvantageous and fled? Or was he thinking about saving that “loved one”?

“That could be a lie—Tgurneu's attempt to confuse us. Ignore it,” warned Adlet.

About twenty minutes must have passed since then. Adlet, Fremy, and Dozzu were hiding in the shadows, avoiding the enemy's pursuit. The fiends were still crying out for Fremy's surrender, and she was still ignoring them. Just as Adlet was thinking Tgurneu's plan to unsettle Fremy had failed, he suddenly heard an unfamiliar woman's voice. He looked all around, searching for the source. But no one was there.

“And so we meet...unknown warrior from a thousand years in the future. I am known as the Saint of the Single Flower.”

The voice carried dignity, benevolence, and bottomless strength. For a

moment, Adlet thought the Saint of the Single Flower had been revived, escaped her chains in the Temple of Fate, and was about to join them. But he quickly realized—the voice he'd just heard had come from the crest on his right hand.

Fremy and Dozzu both looked calm. Their ears were focused on the chatter of the fiends echoing around them. Only Adlet had heard that message.

The next words emerging from the crest chilled Adlet to the bone. *“Brave warrior. I bestow upon you the seventh crest. The world...”* Then, just as suddenly as the voice had come, it was gone. Dumbfounded, Adlet waited for it to continue.

He was certain she'd just said *I bestow upon you the seventh crest*. Adlet looked at the crest shining on his right hand. *It couldn't be... This is the seventh crest? It couldn't be... I'm the seventh?*

There's no way, he thought. But the words from the crest had been mysteriously convincing. Adlet was certain they were true—not based on any reason, but instinctively.

His crest was different from the others. It had a peculiar, special power, unlike the other Crests of the Six Flowers. Which was evidence in favor of the revelation that Adlet was the seventh.

He was the one. There was no longer any room for doubt.

“All right. That should do it,” Tgurneu muttered, and then the flower petal on its tongue instantly disappeared. The petal had been created by the Saint of the Single Flower one thousand years ago, a hieroform that controlled the seventh crest. Whoever held the flower petal could choose who to give the seventh crest. The one who held the petal could also impart to the bearer the message left by the Saint of the Single Flower a thousand years ago. Tgurneu had only let Adlet hear the first part.

Tgurneu had revealed the closely guarded secret to Adlet: that he was the seventh.

“We can't be wasting time. Number seventeen, it's time to go to work.”

The minion that stepped forward in response to Tgurneu's call was a

tentacled caterpillar-fiend, so repulsive a human could hardly stand to look at it. It possessed powerful healing abilities. In exchange for lacking even the slightest offensive capabilities, it could heal the wounds of any fiend. What was truly awesome about it was that it could even heal damage to a fiend's core to some degree.

Two fiends had been designated as a number seventeen. One was installed beside the wolf-fiend so it could heal Fremy in case anything happened. The other was with Tgurneu.

"Now then, this is an important task. Failure is not permitted. Treat this mission with the utmost care," Tgurneu said. Atop its head were horns roughly the shape of a leafy strawberry top, and one of the vines growing from them sharpened into a needle. Tgurneu used it to pierce its own body.

Learning that the crest he bore was the seventh confused Adlet, and he was given no time to calm his mind before the next disaster came bearing down on them.

Fremy noticed he wasn't himself and started to say something, when suddenly, she was spitting blood.

"Fremy!" The moment Adlet saw it, he completely forgot about the voice he'd just heard. Keeping Fremy safe was everything. All this business with the seventh crest was second or third priority.

Looking at Fremy's chest, Adlet found a strange, red, ring-shaped mark there.

He'd seen this mark before.

It was about a year ago, back when he'd been spending day and night in training under Atreau Spiker. Atreau had been researching fiends the whole time, too.

One day, someone had sent a number of fiend corpses to Atreau with an explanation that a soldier had found them in hiding in the Verdant Land. No sooner had the soldier discovered them than one pierced its own chest with its claw and died. The others began spitting blood at the exact same moment. The soldier had apparently been confused as to why the fiends had died without a fight.

Though the acquisition of corpses was a common event, Adlet wondered what kind of connections Atreau had to get them. Puzzled, Adlet had waited for Atreau to finish inspecting the bodies.

After some time, Atreau had pointed at them and said, “It seems certain fiends have a strange power.”

“Oh. But they all have strange powers, don’t they?”

“It’s not the ability that’s strange. It’s the purpose.” Atreau showed him the corpse. There was nothing odd about the one that had killed itself with its claws. There were, however, strange marks on the chests of the others, shaped like circles of red thread. “The fiends had something done to them. First of all, I found a kind of parasite in the one that stabbed itself. And all the other stiff had strange tumors inside. Those tumors had some power that was the cause of death. A fiend used its ability on them.”

“What kind of ability?”

“It’s obvious to me that it kills a whole bunch of other fiends when a certain one kicks the bucket. Now then, what would be the purpose of such an ability? Were they afraid of a secret getting out...?” Atreau mused.

Figuring it was nothing important, Adlet had left Atreau to go back to his training. Following that, Atreau had continued researching this chain death but ultimately came to the conclusion that he wouldn’t gain much in the way of results and gave it up.

The loop-shaped mark on Fremy’s chest was definitely that same chain-death ability, and it had yet to be fully activated. But that meant if a certain fiend died, Fremy would, too, at the same time.

Adlet was about to inform Fremy and Dozzu but suddenly remembered what that aerial fiend had yelled not long ago—its message intended for the seventh.

“Betrayal will not be f6rgiven! If you r6vealeven part of the truth to the Braves, p6nishment from C6mmander Tgurneu will be instantaneous!”

That hadn’t been meant for Hans. It had been for him.

Tgurneu was warning him not to reveal even part of the truth. That must have

meant he shouldn't reveal the chain-death ability to his allies. If Tgurneu's intention was to kill him, Adlet wouldn't have cared. But if Tgurneu's target was Fremy...

Adlet couldn't tell the others about the chain-death ability. He didn't want to endanger Fremy—not even in the slightest.

“So Tgurneu implanted a parasite or something inside my chest beforehand in case I ever got in its way. This must mean it's been activated... So what Tgurneu means to say is that if I continue to fight now, I'll die. And if I surrender, I'll be saved?” asked Fremy.

“If that's the intention, that's rather strange,” said Dozzu. “Why didn't Tgurneu use it before?”

Ignorant of everything, Dozzu and Fremy speculated as to Tgurneu's intent. Once more, Adlet recalled what the aerial fiend had said. *“Prótect Cómmander Tgurneu! Prévent the Braves' attacks and kill them all! You should understand that if by any chänce something happens to Cómmander Tgurneu, your loved one will die!”*

Adlet understood then which fiend's death would kill Fremy: Tgurneu's. It had to be.

Adlet was frozen—unable to move. Tgurneu had forced him to see that if they slayed Tgurneu, Fremy would die, too. He could no longer kill Tgurneu, and he wasn't allowed to reveal the existence of the chain death to the others, either.

His brain couldn't keep up with all these sudden sharp turns. A voice that had sounded like the Saint of the Single Flower had told him he was the seventh. Fremy had been taken hostage, and only Adlet was aware of it.

What do I do? Adlet was in agony.

Tgurneu was certain that this plan, built over the course of fifty years, had borne definite fruit. Tgurneu's manipulation of Atreau had all been for this moment, when it took the Black Barrenbloom hostage to threaten the seventh.

There had been two requirements for this accomplishment: first, teaching the seventh about the existence of the chain-death ability beforehand. Adlet had to understand that Fremy was a hostage, or there would be no point. And the

most important thing was that only the seventh ever know about the ability. Secretive Atreau had hidden most of his research from everyone but his apprentices, just as Tgurneu had induced him to.

None of the Braves were aware that Fremy had been taken hostage. Adlet couldn't tell them.

If they realized Fremy would go down with Tgurneu, one of the Braves might save her. Fremy might even kill herself to keep from becoming a burden. But that wouldn't be a concern if nobody else was even aware of her predicament.

Tgurneu liked taking hostages. No—you could say Tgurneu was obsessed with it. Why? Because it was a ploy that capitalized on love. The suffering and agony on human faces when Tgurneu took hostages was always so satisfying.

“Now then, Adlet. You'll understand what you should do now, won't you?”

Adlet frantically tried to sort out the situation. He himself was the seventh. He couldn't doubt that. He'd understood immediately that the voice's message was true.

So Hans was a real Brave, and that meant the transfer ability had never existed. At the temple, Adlet had assumed Hans was the seventh and set him up, guessing based on his behavior that a transfer ability existed. That was what he'd told the Braves of the Six Flowers through the white lizard-fiend and Nashetania. But this meant all his assumptions had been fundamentally mistaken. There was no such thing as the transfer ability. The Black Barrenbloom would stop if they killed Fremy.

If it was revealed that Adlet was the seventh, then his lie about the transfer ability would be exposed, too, and the Braves wouldn't hesitate to kill Fremy. Fremy herself would choose death, too. So he had to protect this secret.

But still, what was Tgurneu thinking? Why had it chosen Adlet as the seventh? If his role was to protect Fremy, then how had Tgurneu known he would fulfill it?

Calm down, Adlet thought, pulling himself together. It didn't matter who the seventh was. It wasn't important what Tgurneu was thinking, either. The primary thing that should be on his mind was how to keep Fremy safe.

Adlet decided he had no choice but to cancel the plan for now. Putting his hand on Fremy's shoulder, he said, "We're meeting up with Rolonia...and with Mora. We have to treat your chest." He had to undo the chain death waiting for her. Killing Tgurneu would come after that was done. Until then, Tgurneu had to live, no matter what.

But Fremy shook off his hand, saying, "What? Don't be ridiculous!"

Adlet almost blurted out *At this rate, if we kill Tgurneu, you're going to die*. Yet, the words wouldn't come out. "But I made up my mind I'd keep you safe!"

Fremy smacked his hand away. "Stop. We should continue with the plan. It doesn't look like I'm going to die right away. We just have to kill Tgurneu before I do. We can heal me afterward."

No, Fremy. We can't.

"Either way, we must kill Tgurneu, or we'll all die. Now, we have no choice but to focus on Tgurneu's defeat," said Dozzu.

Dozzu and Fremy dashed off. They were going to go through with it. *What should I do?* Adlet asked himself over and over in his mind. It didn't matter anymore that he was the seventh. Whether he was a real Brave or the seventh, as long as Fremy was safe, he was fine. How would he protect her? The question occupied every corner of his mind.

If Adlet could just undo the threat on Fremy's chest, everything would be resolved, but he couldn't even guess as to how to accomplish that. Adlet had only ever seen what the ability did. He'd never researched how it might be undone. He couldn't even speculate at that.

Mora? Or Rolonia? Adlet immediately dropped that thought. Even for them, it would be difficult. They both specialized in healing injuries. He doubted either would know a way to undo a fiend ability once activated on someone.

Dozzu or Nashetania. They might help him out somehow, he thought, but then he immediately rejected the idea. First of all, there were too many fiends lurking everywhere. They would be watching the party's actions. If they attempted to undo the chain-death ability, they were sure to be found. There was no way Tgurneu would just stand by and let that happen. It might actually

punish them for it. It obviously wouldn't kill itself, but there was also no guarantee that the ability was its only means of killing Fremy. Adlet couldn't risk it.

So he could neither rely on Mora's or Rolonia's abilities, nor could he consult with Dozzu or Nashetania.

Fremy was nearly finished laying the groundwork for their plan. There had been no contact from Nashetania and Rolonia, which meant preparations were going well on their end, too. At this rate, they would end up killing Tgurneu.

Adlet considered deliberately discarding the light gem in his belt pouch to throw a wrench in things for the time being—to force them to retreat and buy time. But he realized that was pointless, too. It wouldn't resolve anything. His allies would come up a new scheme to take Tgurneu's life and carry it out.

Should he obstruct the Braves and prevent the success of the current plot? He couldn't do that, either. Dozzu, Nashetania, and Goldof would suspect him. If Hans and Chamo found out, they would take the opportunity to expose him as the seventh.

The reason Fremy wasn't dead now was because Adlet had insisted killing her was pointless, and they all believed the Black Barrenbloom had a hidden transfer power. If his lie came to light, Fremy would die. He couldn't allow even the slightest possibility that the truth might be revealed.

Adlet's mind whirled around desperately. Was there no way to kill Tgurneu and keep Fremy safe? Hell, was there no way to keep Fremy alive, period?

Fremy extended her hand to him then. "Hand me that light gem, Adlet. I can't leave it to you right now." She'd noticed Adlet was distressed and seemed concerned.

Adlet shook his head to tell her he was okay. His thoughts still a mess, he kept running with the others toward the fake command center.

Adlet understood there was only one way he could protect Fremy—to kill all the Braves of the Six Flowers, just as Tgurneu had ordered.

He also understood how simple that would be right now.

But even if he did kill all the Braves as Tgurneu had instructed, what would happen to Fremy? She'd sworn she'd keep fighting until her death. She would obviously face Tgurneu alone and die. So was it all over? Was there no way to keep her safe? That couldn't be. He was the strongest man in the world, so he should have been able to find a way.

No sooner had the thought occurred to him than he heard the voice of a fiend coming from somewhere. It was crying out in search of Adlet, Fremy, and Dozzu. "Cöme back to us, Fremy! We wön't give up trying to cónvince you!" Adlet saw the pain on Fremy's face the moment she heard it.

That was when Adlet made up his mind.

Fremy hated Tgurneu. That much was clear. But Fremy didn't hate all fiends. Somewhere in her heart, she wanted them to accept her. She had once loved fiends, and that love had yet to entirely disappear.

So Adlet would kill all the Braves aside from Fremy.

And he would send her back to the fiends.

Fremy would try to protect her allies. She would keep fighting to kill Tgurneu, but Adlet would stop her. He would make sure to convince her, even if it cost him his own life. He would convince her she would be happiest if she returned to where she had originally belonged.

It would be painful. He knew this would hurt more than anything he'd ever overcome, more than any battle he'd ever fought. Fremy saw Rolonia as a friend. She didn't think badly of Mora, either. She would mourn their deaths. Plus, Fremy believed in him. When she found out who the seventh really was, it was going to hit her hard. She might hate him. He was going to wound her despite his promise to make her happy. That was the most painful thing of all.

But he still had to do this. He had to protect her. He had to endure the pain. And he could—because he was the strongest man in the world.

Right about when Adlet was making up his mind to kill the Braves, Mora was at the north side of the ruins yelling, "I'm sorry, Goldof! Please bear it a little longer!"

Goldof and Mora were together inside the fifty-five-yard-wide barrier. The

corpses of about twenty fiends that had fallen to Goldof's sword were piled inside it. Mora's hands clenched the stake tight as she sent her power pouring into it.

The fiends pressed against the barrier, violently battering it over and over with a unified effort. Even this barrier couldn't hold out for long. When it ripped, Mora quickly repaired it while Goldof fought off the fiends that burst inside. They had done this several times.

As Mora powered the barrier, she also scanned the area attentively with her clairvoyance. Nashetania and Rolonia were running around about half a mile away from where Mora and Goldof were.

Nashetania covertly scattered dry leaves soaked in chemical in her wake, watching cautiously for any fiends that may have noticed or might be picking up leaves. Her work was admirably perfect. Not a single fiend had caught on.

From Mora's position, she couldn't really tell how things were going with Adlet, Fremy, and Dozzu. The fake command center was outside her range. She couldn't see the party fighting there, either.

But the number of aerial fiends in the sky was steadily decreasing. It seemed Fremy was handling her role. Once the fire was set in the forest, Mora and Goldof planned to wrap themselves in fireproof cloths that Adlet had handed them earlier and break out of the circle of fiends surrounding them. Just a little longer. A little longer, and the plan would begin.

Meanwhile, Rolonia was guarding Nashetania's back as she kept an eye on their surroundings.

At first, it had been terrifying. Even Rolonia had thought Adlet's plan was dangerous, wondering if Nashetania and Dozzu would actually do what they'd been told. What she was most anxious about was her own acting ability, that she might ruin Adlet's plan. But that anxiety was gradually fading. She was fooling the fiends.

Nashetania came to her side, brought her lips close to Rolonia's ear and said, "You're deceiving them so well. It's perfect." Though Nashetania was an enemy, her compliment made Rolonia sincerely glad.

“By the way, you heard those cries earlier, didn’t you?” Nashetania added. By that, she must have meant all the fiends calling for Fremy’s surrender. As they had been running around the ruins, the voices of the fliers had reached their ears. “They might attempt something. If Fremy betrays us...”

“N-no, please don’t say that.” Rolonia gave Nashetania her best glare. “She’ll never betray us. You don’t need to worry at all.”

“...All right. If someone as timid as you insists so strongly, then I’ll believe it, too.” Nashetania backed down surprisingly easily.

Together with Fremy and Dozzu, Adlet charged the fake command center again. His goal now was the exact opposite from before. He wasn’t trying to defeat Tgurneu but the Braves of the Six Flowers.

The Braves trusted him; they were putting their all into setting up this ploy, so he had to make the most of it. They would continue preparations for the fire as they had been, and they would ignite it, just as planned. Before that happened, though, Adlet would secretly tell Tgurneu everything.

What would Tgurneu do, once it learned of their scheme? It would turn their strategy against them and kill them all. It would plant a trap, send the leopard-fiend somewhere Tgurneu wasn’t, lure the Braves there, and kill them all. That’s about what Adlet would have come up with. All the Braves, including Fremy, would be caught unawares, assuming the plan was going well. With Tgurneu’s forces, killing all of them but Fremy wouldn’t be that difficult.

They couldn’t take too long. He would do the deed in one fell swoop. And in order to accomplish that, he had to take advantage of this situation.

For now, he had to finish setting up the operation. Adlet was fighting the fiends of the fake command center with Dozzu, looking for a chance to stick the light gem onto the leopard-fiend.

During the many charges so far, Adlet had sown the seeds of their trap. He’d thrown a number of his tools at the enemy horde: smoke bombs, paralysis needles, weighted strings that would tangle around legs, mucus that impeded movement. With these, he’d injured and dirtied the fiends’ bodies.

Adlet checked on the leopard’s status. Since it was protected by its allies, it

hardly had a scratch. But the mucus he'd thrown at it earlier clung to its back and rear, picking up tree leaves, pebbles, and bomb fragments.

Adlet judged that this was his chance. With Dozzu's and Fremy's backup, he rushed into the center of the enemy's formation. The fiends easily prevented his reckless charge, but when Adlet was surrounded, Dozzu fired off a lightning bolt to help him. The moment the enemy was distracted, Adlet threw the light stone at the same time as a handful of needles. Lost among the action of the lightning strike and the needles, the little gem completely escaped the enemy's notice. It clung to the leopard-fiend's rump, and the mucus firmly fixed it there.

Dodging attacks, Adlet splashed more mucus on all the fiends. Some of it stuck to the leopard-fiend's hind quarters, too, and the light gem was no longer visible.

Neither the leopard-fiend, the wolf-fiend, nor any of the others seemed to notice what Adlet had done. To them, Adlet's attacks would have looked wild and indiscriminate.

Adlet continued the melee for a while after until, eventually, he ordered a retreat. The three left the wolf-fiend's formation to hide somewhere away from their pursuers.

Fremy had shot down the majority of the aerial fiends and explained that the rest could be killed at any time. She handed Adlet the explosive device to use when they carried out the plan. "And on your end?" she asked him.

Adlet nodded. He told her he'd finished his preparations, too.

"At first, I really wasn't sure how this would go...but it's working, isn't it?" asked Fremy. She showed no sign that she'd picked up on his intentions.

"We're almost there," said Dozzu. From the fiend's attitude, it didn't seem suspicious, either.

"I'm worried about Mora and Goldof," Fremy admitted. "I wonder if they're safe."

"I doubt it will be a problem. Goldof is the sort who becomes stronger the greater the crisis. He's sure to take care of Mora," Dozzu replied. Neither knew anything.

“I’m more worried about him betraying us than anything else,” Adlet said, cutting into their exchange.

“When we meet up with Nashetania and Rolonia, we won’t be carrying out the plan right away. We’ll check for any missteps or traps from Tgurneu first. We’ll watch to see what the fiends do for a while, and then we’ll execute. Got that?”

Dozzu and Fremy nodded.

“...I think there’s something here,” Adlet said, standing up. He wanted to tell Tgurneu about their plan as soon as possible, but if his other allies found out, it was over. He had to act cautiously.

Fortunately, they were well out of the range of Mora’s clairvoyance. It would take some time for Nashetania and Rolonia to reach them. He just had to keep out of Fremy’s and Dozzu’s sight.

“Fremy, Dozzu, search the area. I’ll do the north, Fremy—the southwest, and Dozzu, you handle the southeast,” Adlet ordered, leaving the ruined building where they’d been hiding. Just as they’d been told, Fremy and Dozzu kept watch.

First, Adlet would put some distance between himself and the other two, then he’d quietly make contact with a fiend. It couldn’t be just any fiend. It had to have a certain degree of intelligence and be able to understand that Adlet was the seventh.

Right around then, a fiend was crawling around the ruin where Adlet, Fremy, and Dozzu had hidden. Tgurneu had deployed it from the true command center, and its mission was to make contact with Adlet and learn the Braves’ plan. The tiny centipede, about twenty inches long, was skilled at covert operations and had sharp senses, though not as sharp as specialist number thirty’s. If Adlet was alone, making contact would be easy.

The centipede-fiend saw Fremy and Dozzu leave the ruin, then immediately found Adlet. He was alone, looking around the area. He wasn’t acting like a scout. He was looking for a fiend to make contact with.

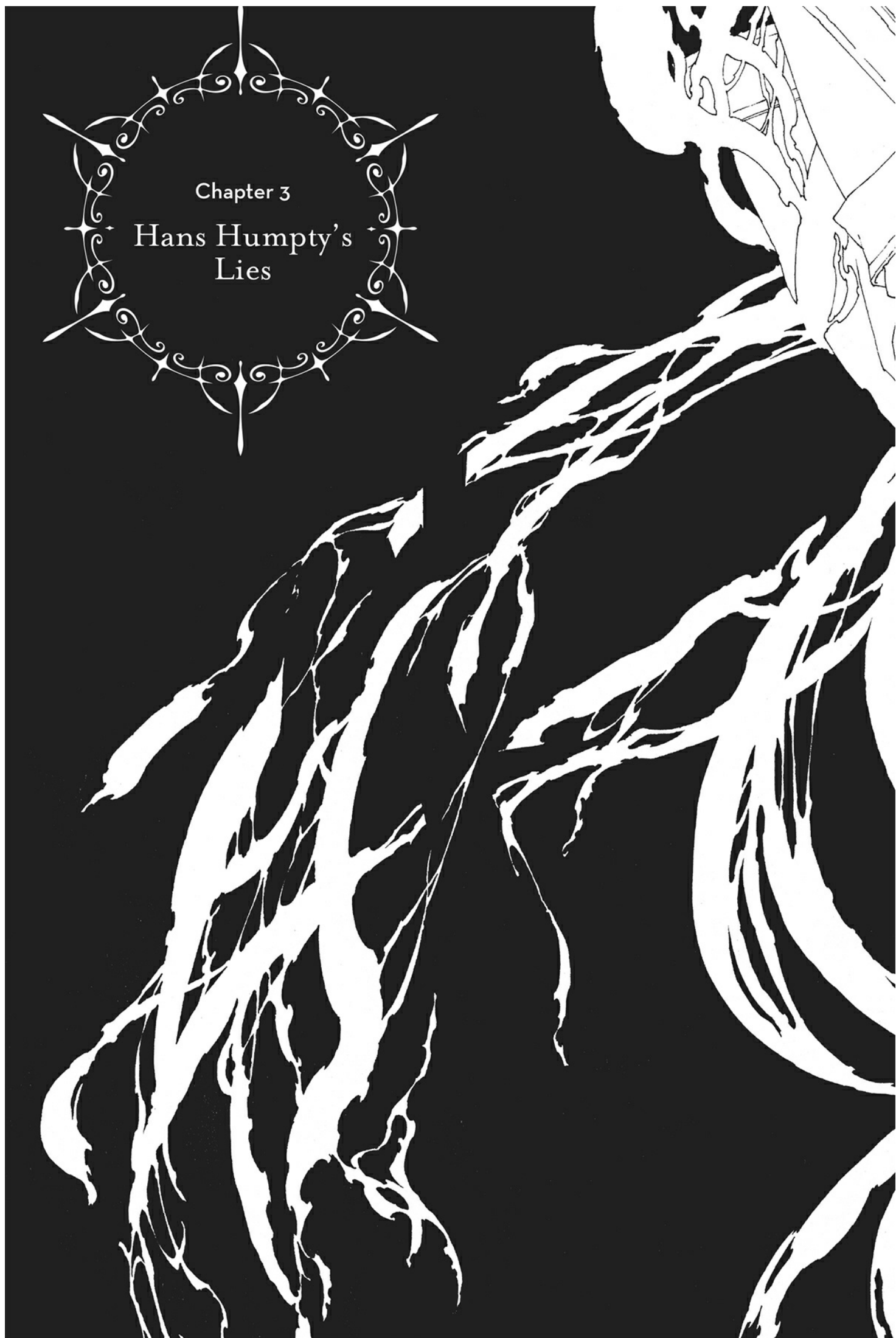
But then, just as the centipede-fiend was about to raise its voice— “Adlet!

Dozzu! This is bad!” Fremy’s voice rang out, cutting through the darkness.
“Chamo’s coming!”

Moments before Adlet would have discovered the centipede-fiend, he turned the other way and ran back toward the ruin.

Chapter 3

Hans Humpty's
Lies



Chapter 3

Hans Humpty's Lies

I really ain't right in the head, Hans Humpty thought.

The situation was desperate. Adlet had successfully set him up as the seventh, and the other Braves had placed their full trust in the real seventh as they went out to face Tgurneu one last time.

Was there any way to prove he was a real Brave? If he killed Adlet and no petals disappeared from their crests, it would leave no room for doubt as to what Adlet was. But Hans wanted to avoid killing the bearer of the seventh crest, since the nature of the mark was still unknown to them. And if a petal vanished upon his death anyway, there'd be no point. It was too uncertain.

But it would be the only method to prove Hans was the real thing. He couldn't think of any way to win the others over, either. Worst of all, they were out of time. The power of the Black Barrenbloom was going to kill all the Braves before Hans revealed the truth, and Tgurneu's forces might well kill them all even before then.

A normal plan wouldn't be enough to save them. Hans had to come up with something that neither Tgurneu nor Adlet would ever imagine.

He was caught between a rock and hard place—and having the time of his life.

After leaving the Temple of Fate, Hans and Chamo ran north for the time being. If they'd stayed where they were, they would have ended up in a potentially lethal fight with the other Braves, so at the time, there'd been no option but to run. Fiends from Tgurneu's army had immediately discovered them, but with few pursuing, it had been easy enough to drive them off. After that, they'd treated the wound in Hans's leg, courtesy of Fremy. Fortunately, Chamo had some of Mora's medicine. It hurt, but he could still fight fine.

Once they were done treating his injury, one of Chamo's slave-fiends returned to her. Chamo had leaned her ear close to the slave-fiend's mouth as it spoke to her. "...Guess they know right where we are. Lots of Tgurneu's fiends are

coming this way.”

“*Meow* , I figured this’d happen,” said Hans. He and Chamo were the only ones who might pose a threat to it now. “Is Tgurneu comin’?”

Chamo whispered to the slave-fiend again. “It says it doesn’t know.”

It’d be great if Tgurneu would come in person to kill them, but the hopes for that were slim. For Tgurneu, the best plan was just to wait patiently someplace safe.

“Fer neow, we kill all the bastards comin’ fer us. After that, we chase down the others. They’ll get away if we waste too much time.”

“It’ll be okay. Chamo’s pet is following the idiots. It’s a smart little guy, so it’s not gonna lose sight of ’em.”

“*Hrmeow*. Sharp little cookie.”

“Tee-hee. Of course. Chamo is Chamo.”

The two smiled at each other. Right that very moment, a fiend popped up from the thicket. In a heartbeat, Hans dashed in close and killed it with a single sword swing, but all around, they could hear more howling in unison.

“Relax, catboy. Leave the enemies to Chamo and think about a way to kill that idiot Adlet. Chamo’ll protect you, catboy.”

Why did Chamo trust him? Why did she not even consider the possibility that he was a traitor? Hans had figured that one out, and personally, it made him a little uncomfortable.

Hans preferred mature, experienced older women. Kids? No way.

“Ngh!”

Some hours passed. Hans’s expectations that they would clean up the enemies quickly and chase the others down were dashed. The two had been pinned just over half a mile north of the temple.

About a hundred enemies had been dispatched to them, enough that even with the two of them, it was hard to make much headway. And worse than their numbers was their skill. They couldn’t even be compared to the fiends

they'd been fighting so far. Unlike most, who fought instinctively with brute force, these ones practiced a brand of refined martial arts that resembled the fighting style of knights, and they could make logical decisions. They clearly moved like an army commanded by a very intelligent fiend.

Hans had been an assassin for over ten years. He'd jumped into crowds of enemies solo more than once or twice. But still, he'd never encountered such a highly trained group before. Could even fiends with their inferior intellect get this good after hundreds of years of training? Once again, Hans was forced to admire Tgurneu's leadership skills.

A single aerial fiend leisurely circled above, observing what Hans and Chamo were doing. It was probably going to fly straight to Tgurneu if anything happened. Hans could tell even from the ground that the creature thought little of them and assumed they wouldn't attack it.

"Don't get in our way! Move!" Chamo vomited up all her slave-fiends for the battle. A water snake slave-fiend spat out a mucus to slow down a cluster of enemies. Meanwhile, Hans was driving for the leader, running along tree branches, leaping down from above to finish it off when— "Never mind protecting Chamo! Just kill those guys!"

The moment Hans heard Chamo yell that to her slave-fiends, he spun around and dashed toward her. When the slave-fiends defending her left, a fiend that had been observing from a distance made its move. It rushed in for a suicide strike, aiming only for Chamo's life.

"Huh?" Chamo tried calling her slave-fiends to her and ran, attempting to get away. But she didn't know how to protect herself and fell before she could get anywhere.

"Hrmeow-mreaah!" In a flash, Hans scooped up Chamo and rolled, then tossed the little Brave over his shoulder and sprinted away. When you're at a disadvantage, you make use of the terrain. That was the basics of strategy.

But Hans didn't know the first thing about the terrain here.

"Ngh...grghhhh! Damn it!" Chamo yelled, frustrated that her mistake had screwed things up for him.

“Hrmeow , Chamo. No need to fret. Ya did good.”

“...Huh?”

“I told ya, *meow* ? You protect me. And in the meowntime, I’ll think of a way to turn this around. Mew gave me the time to think. I got inspired.” That was a lie; he’d come up with a way to turn it around a long time ago. But this would make Chamo happier.

He wasn’t a fan of babysitting. He enjoyed the skin-of-your-teeth fight, but this part was a bit of a buzzkill.

Hans was running around the forest in search of advantageous terrain, still carrying Chamo, when he heard the cries of a fiend in the distance. The echoes rang from the mountains loud and clear.

“Where äre you? What are you döing, seventh?! You don’t mean to bétray us for the Braves, do you?! Betrayal will not be fórgiven! If you réveal even part of the truth to the Braves, pünishment from Cómmander Tgurneu will be instantaneous!”

Hans perked up his ears at that.

“Prótect Cómmander Tgurneu! Prévent the Braves’ attacks and kill them all! You should understánd that if by any chånce something happens to Cómmander Tgurneu, your loved one will die!”

“...Hrmeow , Commeownder Tgurneu’s callin’. Gotta go kill the Braves.”

Chamo gave him a blank look. She seemed to take a moment to understand it was a joke.

That call just now had been directed at Adlet, and they weren’t that far away.

After that, Hans continued listening, but he couldn’t hear the fiendish call anymore. However, he did hear something else—the faint sound of water flowing nearby.

The fiend in command of the unit chasing Hans and Chamo resembled a praying mantis. It had not been given a specialist number, but it bragged that it was the greatest fiend among Tgurneu’s forces. The specialists were really just a bunch of one-trick ponies. What would bring down the Braves was intellect,

skill, and the ability to unify a group; this fiend was the only one in Tgurneu's army that possessed all these. And the praying mantis–fiend had indeed used its hundred subordinates to corner the two strongest of the Braves. The pair's attacks had already whittled down their number by fifteen, but that wasn't a problem.

“Catboy, over there! Run that way!”

The two Braves gave up on trying to kill fiends via straightforward assault and just ran instead. The slave-fiends spread out to investigate the area. They must have intended to use the complex terrain to secure an escape route.

This was an opportunity but also a danger. This area held ancient ruins from the time before the Evil God. To the west were the ruins of a town, and Hans and Chamo were headed in the direction of a watchtower and a charcoal-burning hut. There would also be underground waterways dotting the area. The praying mantis–fiend wasn't fully informed on the nearby topography. There were a wealth of places the pair could hide—and escape routes, too. If they used those, the mantis's forces could lose sight of them.

On the other hand, this was also an opportunity. Since Chamo had dispersed her slave-fiends, her defenses were thinner. Just five remained with her and Hans. Hans himself was running with Chamo in his arms, so he was pressed, too.

The praying mantis–fiend decided that before the two Braves found an escape route, it would kill one of them, and it gave the order to its subordinates to surround them in a surprise attack. It readied its troops to engage all together at one signal.

“Over there!”

Hans ran in the direction Chamo pointed. The praying mantis–fiend spotted the well and inferred that they meant to escape via the underground waterway.

“Gët thëm!” the mantis yelled, and its forces leaped on Hans just before he could jump into the well. Hans couldn't block all the sickles, tentacles, and acid, so Chamo slipped off his shoulder.

One of the fiends swung at Chamo where she lay fallen on the ground. A

slave-fiend shielded her but couldn't block the attack entirely, and the fiend's second strike sent her rolling back.

That instant, all the slave-fiends nearby were sucked into Chamo's mouth. She passed out, losing control over them all, and the mantis was certain of its victory. Hans tried to shield Chamo with his body, and the mantis-fiend was ready to signal the attack. "It's över!" it yelled.

But that very moment, the ground crumbled away to reveal a large hole. The fiends clustered around Hans and Chamo all slid down into it to prevent Hans from escaping. Then, the mantis-fiend realized—there was a big underground cave beneath their feet, and Hans had lured them there.

Most of the fiends, including the mantis-fiend, fell to the bottom of the hole and into a massive reservoir filled with dirty water.

"Bahh!" In the reservoir, Chamo pushed her face up out of the water as dozens of slave-fiends burst up from the surface. Chamo hadn't been knocked unconscious. She had been sending the bulk of her slave-fiends to lie in wait inside the reservoir.

She was the Saint of Swamp. All the slave-fiends under her command were aquatic, and water was where they fought best.

The moth-fiend watching over the tides of battle from the sky could hardly believe its eyes. Suddenly, a large hole had opened in the ground, and Hans and Chamo had fallen in together with a majority of the fiends.

What's more, all the slave-fiends surrounding them had rushed in to attack, and the ten or so fiends that remained aboveground also plunged down into the great hole. All the moth-fiend could hear from the dark pit was the shrieking of fiends.

The moth-fiend judged that their attempt to stop Hans and Chamo had failed, and it turned around back toward Tgurneu. Its only job was to immediately report if anything unusual happened.

But the dismayed moth-fiend failed to notice that the moment the large hole had opened in the earth, Hans had escaped the fall, stepping up fiend to fiend and launching himself into the trees, where he was now crouched right below.

And he had readied throwing knives in his fingertips.

The two blades pierced its wings at the base, and the moth-fiend lost its balance and fell. It righted itself again and started flapping away when Hans leaped from the treetops to slice it to pieces.

“...That was close, *meow*,” Hans muttered, standing beside the big hole.

“What’re you talking about? That was easy.” Chamo rode the back of a slave-fiend up to the surface.

She didn’t get it. They really had only just scraped together that victory. If the enemy had realized the underground reservoir was there, the pair would never have been able to set up that trap. Hans could tell the mantis leader had been pretty sharp. If they’d been any slower with their snare, the mantis probably would have caught on.

Hans had only been able to kill that moth-fiend due to a combination of the enemy’s carelessness and luck. They couldn’t afford to let a messenger reach Tgurneu. If it became known that the fiends had failed to stop their approach, further reinforcements would be deployed.

Well, done battles don’t matter, Hans thought, instantly forgetting the round they’d just won. “*Meow*, the fight comin’ up is gonna be a lot tougher.”

He dashed off westward, and Chamo followed after him astride a slug slave-fiend. The slug cleaned the dirt off Chamo with jets of water from its tentacles.

But right after they started off, Chamo seemed to notice something and dismounted to scoop up a twelve-inch-long earthworm. She leaned in close to discuss something with it.

“The idiots are doing some stuff west of here in a place that looks like an old town. It says they’re all there. But there’s a whole bunch of fiends, too, so it couldn’t get close.”

Hans recalled seeing this slave-fiend before, when he’d fought with Chamo in the Phantasmal Barrier. The little earthworm had also acted as a scout when their party was running through the Cut-Finger Forest.

“...Hmm? What?” said Chamo. The earthworm moved its mouth close to

Chamo's face and said something. "It says there's a group of about a hundred, and the one in the middle is acting like a real big shot. It says that's probably Tgurneu."

"That guy's smart."

"Of course. It's Chamo's pet."

Hans's mind was spinning. He'd already come up with a rough outline of a plan, but he still hadn't decided on the details. He had to figure out to some degree what Tgurneu, the other Braves, Dozzu, Nashetania, and Adlet were all doing, or there was no way he could make a real strategy.

"What're those idiots up to?" wondered Chamo.

"Who kneows. If that earthworm don't, 'course we can't." That was a lie. The other Braves would be coming up with a plan to kill Tgurneu, then move to carry it out.

Adlet had tricked the Braves into believing the Black Barrenbloom wouldn't stop, even if they killed Fremy. They believed they had no choice but to kill Tgurneu. And Adlet would be facilitating Tgurneu's defeat, too—on the surface.

"I ain't too sure what the others are doin', but I do kneow what Tgurneu's up to. It's gonna be hidin' somewhere, waitin' 'til the Barrenbloom kills us all."

"Yeah, Chamo thinks so, too. The big shot is prolly just some lackey. It'd be nice if we could lure Tgurneu out from hiding somehow, though."

"If it was that dumb, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Chamo was calling on every brain cell to come up with a solution. Hans wasn't expecting anything from her mental faculties, but there was no reason to stop her, so he let her be. "We've just gotta prove that you're not the seventh, after all," she said. "Fremy and Rolonia are hopeless, but that dummy Goldof was the one guy who suspected Adlet. Let's get him on our side."

"Not gonna happen. The princess likely has him wrapped around her little finger. He can't go against what she says."

"So we kill that dummy princess. We should've killed her right after they told us about the temple in the first place."

“And make an enemy outta Goldof?” Hans discarded that idea with a single remark.

“So then...we kill Fremy, after all?”

“*Meow* , I dunno...” For once, Hans wasn’t sure what to say.

He had figured that was the most certain course of action, too. Killing the Black Barrenbloom would mean the biggest crisis was dealt with. Fremy was pretty strong, and Adlet would do everything he could to defend her, as would the other Braves he’d deceived. But still, he and Chamo would have a chance at victory.

Hans wavered—should he target Fremy or come up with a different tactic instead?

But he quickly reached a firm decision. Even he and Chamo wouldn’t be able to kill her instantly. It would clearly take a few minutes of fighting, and there was no way Tgurneu would just sit there and watch in the meantime.

“What’ll we do, catboy? If you can’t think of anything, then Chamo’ll do it. Chamo’ll kill Fremy good, even if Chamo’s life is on the line.”

“*Meow* , fine. We kill Fremy. Once ya see ’em, go straight fer her and don’t think ’bout neowthin’ else. I’ve got a plan—a way to get rid of her fer sure.”

“Just gotta rush straight in, huh?”

Hans was going to pull something crazy. He’d chosen to do something neither Adlet nor Tgurneu would ever think up. It would be a disadvantageous gamble. If he blew this, it would be over for him—and the world, too.

Hans also wasn’t going to tell Chamo about this gamble. If you want to deceive your enemy, you’ve got to start with your friends.

“I’m goin’ ahead a bit to set up my plan. I’ll meet up with ya in a flash, so keep on runnin’.”

“Huh?” Chamo was confused by the sudden order.

“Ya don’t have to kneow about my plan. If we’re gonna kill Fremy, we need to surprise her. Yer looks and yer actions might give away what I’m thinkin’.”

“...I don’t really get it, but okay.”

Hans ran through the forest, away from Chamo. Just as he vanished from sight into the treetops, he called back: “And that earthworm. Release it again. Make it keep an eye on the big shot.”

“Got it.”

Hans waited a little, watching Chamo’s earthworm wriggle past his feet. Silently, he approached it and plucked it up gently. The surprised earthworm began flailing around. “Settle down a li’l.”

From their conversation, Hans had figured out what sort of abilities this earthworm slave-fiend possessed. It was intelligent and had good observational skills. If needed, it would even watch for, remember, and report things other than what Chamo had specifically requested.

And Chamo couldn’t tell what the earthworm was doing or where it was.

“This’ll meowbe hurt, but suck it up. This plan is countin’ on ya,” Hans said, bending the earthworm and tying it like a ribbon. Then, he tucked it into his pocket. This earthworm was the cornerstone of this scheme.

After that, Hans took care of a few things, and then, once his arrangements were made, he recoinnoitered with a puzzled-looking Chamo. Then, they headed toward Adlet and the others.

“Chamo and Hans are here?” Tgurneu was understandably shocked to hear this from the wolf-fiend. They weren’t on the approach; they were here. Tgurneu was stunned at the incompetence of its subordinate, who had failed both to hold them back—even with a unit of one hundred—and to report the breakthrough.

An aerial fiend circling in search of Adlet’s party had reported to the wolf-fiend that it happened to see slave-fiends and said that Hans and Chamo were headed straight for Adlet, Fremy, and Dozzu.

“<Send out one unit to fight them. Stop Hans, at the very least,>” Tgurneu ordered for the time being.

But the wolf-fiend complained through number twenty-four, “<Th-they wön’t

make it in time. Fremy's shot down most of the messenger fiends, and there aren't many I can use.>"

"...Ngh." Tgurneu was irritated. "<You know where Adlet and Fremy are, don't you?>"

"<Y-yes, Commander, I do.>"

"<Chamo and Hans will most likely seek to kill Fremy. Once Hans, Chamo, and Fremy begin fighting, attack from the side. Your target is Chamo. Have the Braves or Dozzu and Nashetania kill Hans. Listen to me: No matter what happens, absolutely do not allow Fremy or Adlet to die.>"

"Understood." Number twenty-four stopped transmitting the wolf-fiend's message.

Number eleven, at Tgurneu's feet, said, "Should we not also sortie to kill Hans, Commander?"

"...No need. I trust in the power of love—and in Adlet. As he is now, he's sure to make it through such a simple bump in the road." Tgurneu kicked at the ground in irritation.

Right when it was getting good. Tgurneu had been delightedly imagining Fremy's despair, so tantalizingly close... And now this interruption.

Adlet tossed two flash grenades into the sky. Bursting in the air, they illuminated the ruins like day for an instant. One flash grenade was the signal that they had found Tgurneu. Two meant Hans was coming.

"Where is Hans?!" Adlet asked Fremy and Dozzu.

"I don't know," said Fremy. "But he should be close. A slave-fiend discovered me, then immediately left. I think they'll be coming for us soon."

Hans's target would be either him or Fremy.

The three ran westward. Nashetania and Rolonia would be coming to them from that direction. Adlet's party would meet up with them to face Hans and Chamo. The three alone would be at a disadvantage otherwise.

"So Hans truly has won Chamo over," said Dozzu. "She still believes you're the seventh, Adlet."

“Nothing we can do about that,” Fremy replied. “This is Chamo. She may be strong, but you can’t expect much from her brains-wise.”

Listening to Fremy and Dozzu’s conversation, Adlet considered what to do now.

He couldn’t kill Hans or Chamo. If he killed Hans, he could talk his way out of it, but killing Chamo was out of the question. He would be suspected of being the seventh all over again. On the other hand, leaving the two alive would place Fremy’s life in jeopardy.

And this would also make it more difficult to kill all the Braves aside from Fremy. He would be forced to suspend the plan, as they’d decided beforehand. He would no longer be able to ensnare the Braves in their own stratagem.

But right now, he didn’t have time to be thinking so far ahead. He had to deal with the imminent threat.

When Rolonia and Nashetania saw the light grenades, they sprinted off eastward. Plowing through fiends as they went, they listened and looked for Adlet’s party.

“N-Nashetania, you understand that you can’t kill Chamo or Hans, right? We’re just going to defeat and capture them,” said Rolonia.

“Don’t worry. I’m hoping the situation will allow it.”

Goldof and Mora both saw the light of the flash grenades, but being surrounded, they couldn’t go anywhere.

“Hans... Chamo...,” Goldof murmured. He was still on the fence. He didn’t quite believe that Adlet was a real Brave. In his mind, he called out to Hans and Chamo. *If you two are real Braves, then show me you can get out of this. Prove you’re not the fakes. You’re the only ones who can.*

Upon receiving the order from Tgurneu, the wolf-fiend sent out its troops—the thirty best fighters of the hundred under its command. They would be the first to engage them and prepare a surprise attack. The wolf didn’t explain to the fiends who the seventh was. It only ordered them to kill Chamo while the others were busy fighting. It moved the remaining seventy to a position where they could quickly rush to the battle.

The wolf-fiend then found a conveniently large tree and climbed up into it. Looking out through the canopy into the distance, it immediately spotted Adlet's party and two lights rushing toward it with incredible speed. That would be Hans and Chamo. They would catch up to Adlet's group soon.

"We're gonna fight!" Adlet yelled.

They couldn't get away. Hans and Chamo would catch up before they could rejoin Rolonia and Nashetania. Adlet yelled and turned around, readying paralysis and pain needles in the fingers of both hands.

Astride the back of a slug, Chamo was making a beeline for them, illuminating the whole area with a light gem. Her eyes were locked on Fremy, and she stuffed her foxtail down her throat to vomit up every slave-fiend she had. Lightning, bombs, and needles held them at bay, but even Adlet, Fremy, and Dozzu attacking simultaneously couldn't stop all her forces.

"Watch out!" cried Adlet. The slave-fiends that had slipped through their attacks were after Fremy. Adlet shoved one away with a body blow while Dozzu fried another with its lightning. *Where is Hans?* Adlet wondered, looking around. He sensed something in the darkness. Hans was coming for Fremy from the side.

"Just lie down and die already!" Chamo yelled, pointing at Fremy. Instantly, even the slave-fiends protecting Chamo joined the attack as Hans leaped from the treetops toward Fremy.

"It'll be a cold day in hell!" Adlet's sword blocked Hans's swing.

"*Hrmeeeaow!*" Hans fell back, throwing two knives. One missed, sticking near Adlet's belt and leaving him unhurt. The other went for Fremy. She easily repelled it with the grip of her gun, but the slave-fiends used that moment to close the distance.

The fight turned to chaos, with both sides in a jumble together. *This is bad*, thought Adlet, and he ran for Fremy to protect her.

Right then—Hans grabbed hold of a light gem he'd been hiding in his hand, and for just a blink, the gem flashed at its brightest intensity. The glare wasn't as powerful as a flash grenade, but as Adlet's, Fremy's, and Dozzu's eyes were

used to the dark, it blinded them for an instant. Fremy and Dozzu both froze for that split second.

“Is that all you got?!” Adlet didn’t flinch, slicing out at Hans, but Hans slipped past Adlet’s sword and switched targets. Landing on the ground with his hands, he took the fight in the exact opposite direction—toward Chamo, on the back of her slug-fiend. His sword was raised, ready to descend on Chamo at full force.

“Huh?” Chamo muttered weakly. Hans’s blade was nearing her neck as if a magnet were pulling it in.

“Chamo!” A high-pitched, metallic sound rang out. Hans’s trajectory was suddenly reversed by Fremy’s bullet, but he’d blocked it with his sword and escaped injury.

“...Wh...at?” All the slave-fiends froze, as did Adlet and Dozzu. The only movement was in Fremy’s fingertips, loading her next bullet.

“...Huh?”

Hans rolled on the ground, then slowly stood up. Carelessly, he scratched his head and shrugged.

“...Catboy?” Chamo touched her hand to her neck. She looked at her palm. It was sticky with blood.

“That was close. I blew it. If Fremy hadn’t gotten in my way, I’d have taken ya meowt.” Hans smiled gleefully.

The wolf-fiend stood on its branch, frozen. Unable to process what was going on, it simply stopped just as it was about to give the fiends waiting nearby the order to charge.

Tgurneu’s instruction had been to kill Chamo while the Braves were fighting one another. But the wolf-fiend could no longer obey. Both sides had stopped fighting.

Hans and Chamo were supposed to be working together. So then, why would Hans attack Chamo? Had Commander Tgurneu lied? If so, then what for?

“So I couldn’t even kill Chamo. Oh, *meow* . I can’t do anythin’ right.” As Hans spoke, he started ambling around. Chamo was stunned, still staring at him.

He's finally stopped hiding it , Fremy thought.

"Fiends, y'all stay back a bit longer, *meow* . I'm talkin' here, so don't get in the way," Hans called out to thin air. "Well, that's neow problem. I got other cards to play. Lemme tell ya somethin', Adlet."

Adlet seemed unable to process the situation. For the moment, Dozzu was watching attentively.

"I've decided I won't try to kill Fremy no meowr. I realized there's a better use for her."

"...What are you trying to say?" demanded Fremy.

"My first idea was to use ya as a tool to kill Chamo. Well, that failed. But there's still one other way you can help me. I've decided to take ya hostage, Fremy."

"...Hostage?" repeated Adlet.

"I'll be frank: I can kill Fremy at any time. If ya wanna save her, Adlet, then listen up. Look, if ya do anythin' funny, it'll all be over in a flash. You don't behave, Fremy's as good as dead."

"What did he do, Fremy?! Hans or Chamo did something to you, didn't they?!" Adlet yelled. But Fremy shook her head. She didn't recall even being touched by a slave-fiend, much less Hans. But then she quickly remembered something—that red mark stamped on her chest.

It was probably no lie that he could kill her at any time.

"...He's...a helluva bastard," Adlet muttered.

"My demand is...well, I'm sure I don't have to tell mew, Adlet."

Adlet was speechless. He'd known Hans was a formidable man but hadn't realized how formidable.

Since Fremy and Dozzu believed Hans was the seventh, they'd think he was taking her hostage as an accomplice to Tgurneu. But since Adlet knew he himself was the seventh, he saw something else.

Only Adlet understood what Hans was really after.

It was true that Hans had attacked Chamo. But Hans was a real Brave, and he would never try to actually kill an ally. That had just been an act, planned with Chamo in advance. So why the act? To surprise Fremy and Adlet—and create an opportunity for Hans. It had worked and confused Adlet, and Fremy had been distracted by the need to protect Chamo. And they'd all been blinded by the light gem, to boot.

What had Hans and Chamo done in that moment? Hans had told them the answer himself.

He had taken Fremy hostage.

Though Fremy had said Chamo hadn't done anything to her, they weren't exactly aware of every ability Chamo's slave-fiends possessed. It would be no shock for one to be able to poison you unawares or implant a parasite in your body. In fact, it would be stranger if they didn't. And such an ability had allowed Hans and Chamo to take Fremy hostage.

Considering all Hans had said and done so far, Adlet had no choice but to acknowledge he was telling the truth. He and Chamo had taken Fremy hostage to threaten Adlet. But Adlet couldn't get where this was going at all.

"...He's...a helluva bastard."

Hans had figured out everything—that Adlet would be willing to give his life to defend Fremy, that Tgurneu had taken Fremy hostage to demand Adlet's betrayal...and that Adlet had caved to that demand. There was no other way he would have been able to conceive of this plan.

"My demand is...well, I'm sure I don't have to tell mew, Adlet."

The situation was beyond disastrous. Fremy's life was in the balance on both sides now: by the Braves and Tgurneu. Tgurneu was telling Adlet to protect Tgurneu and betray the Braves of the Six Flowers. Meanwhile, Hans was telling him to stab Tgurneu in the back, literally and figuratively.

And both sides were threatening to kill Fremy if he didn't obey their orders.

What should he do? For a long time, Adlet stared at Hans's face.

"...Hn."

Then, Chamo's shoulders started shaking.

"Wah...hic...WAHHHHH!" She flung her head back and started bawling loudly, but after about ten seconds of nonstop wailing, she suddenly stopped. "...I'll... kill...you..."

The moment Hans heard that, he turned around and took off like a shot. Chamo's slave-fiends completely ignored Fremy and Adlet and chased after him. But Adlet knew her crying was an act. Hans hadn't actually tried to kill her, and she should've know that, too.

Dozzu and Fremy struck at Hans, but neither of their attacks hit.

"We've come to help!" Just as Chamo disappeared from sight, Rolonia and Nashetania burst in.

Took you long enough , Adlet thought.

"...Did you fight them off?"

The two seemed confused that Hans and Chamo weren't around.

"For now, we run, and I'll explain as we go. It's a bad idea to stay in one place for long." Fremy dashed off after Chamo, and the others followed.

Fremy gave them an outline of everything that had happened: the fiends calling for her surrender, the pain and red mark on her chest, Hans's sudden attack on Chamo—and his claim to have taken Fremy hostage before he ran off.

After hearing this report, Nashetania tilted her head. "This doesn't feel right. Hans's and Tgurneu's actions don't seem consistent. First, they're calling for your surrender, and next, they come to tell you they've taken you hostage?"

"I agree," said Fremy. "It may be that they're not coordinated or that Hans is acting on his own."

The group was apprehensive. Adlet was the only one there who knew what was actually going on.

As they ran, he said to Rolonia, "Why are you wasting time? Treat Fremy's chest."

Flustered, she put her hand where the mark had been and rubbed the area a

few times, and her expression clouded. "It's no use. There's nothing I can do."

"Do you think Mora can help her?"

"I doubt even Mora could. I'm not positive, but this is less like a wound and more like a disease. It's as if she's suddenly contracted a fatal sickness."

Adlet scowled. Fremy told him, "I already figured there would be no getting rid of it."

But he pressed Rolonia further. "Give her a thorough examination. Is there anything planted inside her?"

Rolonia did as he said, touching Fremy's chest once more. "...U-um, I can't find anything...but my powers aren't much compared to Torleau's or Lady Mora's..."

"That's enough, Rolonia," Fremy said, pushing her away. Quietly, she asked Nashetania, "You've finished preparing for the fire?" Nashetania gave a tiny nod. "...Then we're doing it. We have no time to lose. Tgurneu is going down."

Dozzu and Nashetania nodded.

This is bad, thought Adlet. He couldn't let them go through with the plan. If Tgurneu died, so would Fremy, and he had yet to tell Tgurneu about their plan. If they did it now, the Braves would succeed.

That was when, from the sky above, an aerial fiend yelled, "A message from Cómmander Tgurneu! 'Häns, I am éxasperated with you! I have no möre use for you! Kill yourself ímmediately! If you cóntinue to disobey my örders, your beloved will be wíped from éxistence!'"

"...This is convenient. They're confused, after all. If we're going to do this, it's now or never. You're fine with this, right, Adlet?" Fremy asked.

Adlet faltered. The first thing he had to do was interrupt the plan, but he couldn't think of anything to say that would convince the others.

The wolf-fiend gave Tgurneu the update through number twenty-four: Hans had suddenly attacked Chamo, then claimed he had taken Fremy hostage and run off.

"<Did you...sit there...and watch? As my plan...was ruined?>" Tgurneu's calm

usually never faltered, but it was now nearing its limits. Its subordinates' hopeless incompetence was indefensible. "<Give the whole army the order to kill Hans.>"

"<But the Braves believe he's the seventh. It could get out that he's a real Bräve—>"

"<Tell him in the Braves' earshot: You're incompetent. I've got no more use for you, so go and die.>" Tgurneu worked its mind, considering for a bit before it asked the wolf-fiend, "<...Which way did Hans and Chamo go?>"

Adlet and the others were chasing Hans. They got an earful of Chamo's yelling and crying ahead of them, as well as the shrieks of the slave-fiends.

"What are you doing, Adlet? This isn't the time to be chasing Chamo. The plan was to capture one to drive them away, but I don't think there's a need for that now." Fremy had to mean that they should start the plan.

"Hold on a minute. I'm gonna take a look around right now," Adlet said, climbing a tree. As he pretended to focus his eyes in the darkness, he considered his course of action.

He would interrupt them, no matter what. But the problem was what came after that. Fremy was Hans and Chamo's collateral, so he had to free her. But had Hans actually taken her hostage in the first place? Chamo was good, but was she capable of implanting a parasite into Fremy without her noticing?

The truth could be that Chamo had done nothing. But even if Adlet suspected that might be the case, he had no proof. Without proof, he couldn't reach a decision.

He pulled out the knife stuck in his belt—the one Hans had thrown at him. He noticed the faint message on it, written in blood, on the side of the blade.

PRETENDED TO BE THE SEVENTH TO MAKE CONTACT WITH FIENDS. FOUND A CLUE TO SAVE FREMY FROM TGURNEU . SHE CAN BE SAVED.

Adlet wiped the message off the knife and stuffed it into one of his pouches. He figured this was good news. If he could free Fremy from Tgurneu, he wouldn't have to betray the Braves anymore. If he could kill Tgurneu, then the Black Barrenbloom would be undone, too, and Hans and Chamo would no

longer have a reason to kill Fremy.

But could he believe the message on the blade?

Fremy was affected by the chain-death ability, that red-mark disease. It couldn't be easily undone, surely. Not even Hans should have been capable of finding a clue as to how to accomplish that.

But Adlet thought that maybe, just maybe, Hans—with his ingenuity and acting skills—could have pulled it off, if Tgurneu had failed to control the information somewhere along the line within its army. There was a possibility that Hans really did have some notion as to how Fremy might be saved.

Adlet climbed down from the tree. He'd made up his mind what to do. First, he would chase down Hans and Chamo and ask them how to rescue Fremy from Tgurneu. If they didn't know how to cancel out the chain-death ability, he would kill the two somehow and free Fremy from them. After that, he would betray the Braves and kill them all except Fremy, for sure.

"We're not gonna withdraw, but don't go through with the plan yet. We've nearly caught Hans," Adlet said to the others.

Aside from Rolonia, they were all surprised to hear that. "Pardon me," interjected Dozzu, "But I don't understand what you're trying to say. We're going to let this chance go?"

"We should just let Chamo handle Hans. Even if he does escape her, it sounds like Tgurneu will kill him for us," Fremy added.

"No, it won't," Adlet replied. "This is not our best chance. Do you think Tgurneu will actually kill Hans? Do you think there's actually confusion in the ranks? That's just a bluff—they're trying to mess with us."

"Then that's convenient for us. While Tgurneu is busy setting up this bluff, we'll go take its life." Then, Fremy looked Adlet in the face as if she'd realized something. "It couldn't be... Do you think Hans could tell you a way to save me?"

In a way, she was right on the mark. He froze, and Fremy pressed him further. "I thought I told you before—you can execute the plan without me now. You need to focus on killing Tgurneu, not worrying about my life."

“But then, Fremy, you’ll—,” Rolonia argued.

Fremy cut her off. “I thought you understood, too, Rolonia. We’re going to kill Tgurneu, even if it costs us our lives.”

Dozzu and Nashetania appeared to agree.

“No,” said Adlet. “I could tell. Hans...figured out something.”

“...?” The whole group seemed confused.

“When Hans was talking, he was watching us. And for a moment, he looked at me. Right then, my gut told me he’d figured out something. I don’t know what. But he’s definitely gotten hold of some important information. Do we go through with the plan or withdraw? I have to find out what he knows, or I can’t reach a decision.”

Even Adlet could see their astonishment and hear their unspoken question: *Are you going to let the perfect opportunity slip away because you have a gut feeling?*

“I underestimated Hans,” Adlet continued. “The most formidable thing about him isn’t his combat abilities—it’s his powers of observation and deduction. If we let him roam free, he’ll read every card in our hand. Whether we keep fighting or run and rework the plan, we have to capture Hans.”

“You’re thinking too much. Hans’s ploys have been a string of failures,” Fremy shot back. Dozzu and Nashetania weren’t convinced, either. And Adlet doubted he could convince them with a “hunch” alone.

“Dozzu...you didn’t deliberately let Hans escape, did you?” Adlet asked, and Dozzu’s eyes went wide. Adlet knew Dozzu and Hans weren’t secretly communicating, but he deliberately cast suspicion on the fiend.

“Hardly. What are you talking about?”

“It looked to me like you coulda hit him with that last strike. Right before he got away. What are you plotting, letting him go?”

“You’re suspecting me at this point? I was aiming for Hans. This is a false accusation.”

“Oh, is it?”

Dozzu and Adlet glared at each other.

“...Understood. We’ll pursue Hans and capture him. If we cooperate with you in this, you will trust that we haven’t been duplicitous?” asked Dozzu. It and Nashetania were in a shaky position. If Adlet threw Dozzu’s loyalties in doubt and threatened to treat it as an enemy if it didn’t obey, Dozzu had no choice but to do as it was told. “But you’re completely mistaken. We absolutely must go through with the plan. First, we’ll capture Hans and disable him, and then we will have Chamo restrain him. After that, let’s carry out the plan. If even this won’t convince you, then we have our own ideas.”

“All right. I’m uneasy about this, but let’s go with that.” Adlet nodded. That was enough.

“Wait. Hans is trying to trap you. Chasing him down is just what he wants.” Fremy still doggedly opposed him.

Then Rolonia said, “I think it’s better to trust Addy’s hunch, Fremy. His hunches have gotten him out of trouble over and over again. Let’s do what he says one more time.”

Gritting her teeth, Fremy nodded.

Adlet gave his allies instructions. “Dozzu, Rolonia. You go back the way you came and keep making sure nothing is going on with the wolf-fiend and its unit. And like Dozzu said, we’re going to be carrying out the plan eventually, so communicate the situation to Mora and Goldof, too.”

“Right,” said Rolonia.

“We’ll chase down Hans,” said Adlet. “Fortunately, Chamo is loud. We’ll be able to tell where they are right away.” Fremy still seemed uneasy, but Adlet grabbed her and ran off with Nashetania.

Goldof was battling the fiends inside the barrier. Quite some time had passed since they’d been informed of Hans and Chamo’s approach.

That was when Mora said, “Dozzu has entered the range of my clairvoyance. It’s told me what’s happened.”

They cleaned up the enemies that had broken into the barrier, and during a

short pause, Mora told Goldof what was going on.

“...It’s not...lying?” Goldof was shocked at how wrong he’d been.

“Dozzu tells us to wait just a little longer. Another push, Goldof.”

Whether they were to escape or carry out the plan, it seemed Goldof had no choice but to keep on fighting.

“Where are you? Where are you, Hans?!” Hans could hear Chamo yelling as he leaped from branch to branch in flight.

Seems my thinkin’ was right, he mused.

Adlet wasn’t Tgurneu’s ally, after all. Tgurneu had simply manipulated his emotions to make him fall in love with Fremy. Hans could tell from Adlet’s expression as they talked—he was thinking about her and nothing else.

Still running, Hans glanced backward and saw Adlet and the others in pursuit. Just as he’d predicted.

The truth was that Hans had not taken Fremy hostage. Chamo hadn’t done anything to her. That was just a bluff. But Hans had figured it would be enough to trick Adlet. The first stage of his plan had succeeded—but the hard part was what came next.

“Found you!” he could hear Chamo shout. Her slave-fiends all stampeded to Hans’s position atop the branches, but Hans used them as stepping stones to leap even higher. If he ever dropped onto the ground, they would be on him in an instant.

“Chamo’s not gonna forgive you! How dare you trick Chamo?!” Chamo was crying and yelling. She didn’t know what Hans was really after. She believed he’d attacked her for real, since he hadn’t brought her up to speed beforehand. Chamo couldn’t act for beans, and any attempt to deceive Adlet with bad acting would fall flat. Hans had judged that Chamo would react how he needed her to, even if he didn’t bother telling her what was actually going on.

“There he is! It’s Häns!” The moment he escaped the slave-fiends, real fiends swooped in to attack him from the side.

“I’ve found him! I’m going to capture him!” And now Fremy’s bullet was flying

at him from behind. Hans just barely managed to avoid the multipronged assaults.

Now he had no allies anywhere. The Braves and Tgurneu—everyone was an enemy. But Hans didn't see this as a problem. In fact, the thrill of being completely alone was just what he'd been looking for.

"Die, Hans, die!"

Before long, Adlet's party found Hans and Chamo. Even though fiends and slave-fiends were all after Hans, he didn't have so much as a scratch.

"Chamo! Wait, please! Killing him would be a bad idea!" Nashetania called out.

Chamo turned around with tears in her eyes and gave them a hair-raising glare. "What? Chamo can't hear you. Chamo's gonna kill Hans now, so could you not get in the way?"

"I'm telling you to calm down, please."

"Do you want to die before him?"

Nashetania fell silent.

But Adlet knew it was a ploy—part of the duo's conspiracy to take Fremy hostage and threaten Adlet. But her acting had a bloodcurdling edge to it. Adlet was surprised she was this good.

"Hans! Stop! We won't kill you!" Fremy called out as she fired her gun.

"What kinda idiot's gonna stop 'cause ya told 'em to?" Using a ruined building as his shield, Hans nimbly evaded her bullets.

"Häns! Die, you üseless creature!" a fiend screeched from Hans's side. Its attack failed to connect, too.

Nashetania's blades and Fremy's bullets blasted the fiends back, and the fiends were attacking the trio, too, as they pursued Hans. *What a bizarre situation*, Adlet thought. Braves, fiends, and two fake Braves, all with completely different motives but chasing one person.

While they were busy getting in one another's way, Hans darted casually

around the ruins.

“Hans! Listen to us!” Adlet yelled.

Hans stood on a tree branch and turned back. “*Hrmeow*. Do ya have some business with me?”

“Tell us everything. If you do, I won’t kill you. Tell us...your goal—and all you know. Everything, every little inkling. And...how to free Fremy!”

First, Adlet had to make sure whether or not Hans really knew a way to save Fremy from Tgurneu. Had he actually found a method to help them cancel the chain-death ability?

“*Meow* ...tell ya, huh? I dunno.” Standing on a tree branch, Hans scratched the end of his nose. “Is Fremy that important to ya, Adlet? If so, I really can’t just tell ya that easy, neow.”

“Don’t you give me...that crap...”

As Adlet lashed out with his blade, Hans threw another knife at him. It thunked into the shoulder of Adlet’s leather armor. When Adlet pulled it out, he found something written on this one, too.

Reveal to everyone you’re the seventh. Or give me proof it’s you. Then, I’ll tell you how to save Fremy.

Adlet frantically wiped the message off the knife and hurled it far away.

So this was his goal, huh? To threaten Adlet into confessing and expose Tgurneu’s full plan to the light of day. That was the purpose of this whole scheme.

Adlet couldn’t do what Hans wanted. Even if he did confess, he didn’t know if Hans would actually save Fremy. Neither Hans nor Chamo would hesitate to sacrifice her life for the sake of victory.

So he couldn’t confess, but if he ignored Hans’s instructions, Chamo would kill Fremy. Desperately, Adlet tried to think of a plan.

“Nashetania, circle around to the left!” Fremy called out, and the two made to ensnare Hans. With enemies bearing down from either side, Hans changed directions, charging for Adlet instead.

“Tch!” Adlet struck back. The two crossed swords. Their blades clashed once, twice, and then Hans said softly, “If ya agree to my deal, then follow me. Alone, *meow*,” jerking his chin in a southeastern direction. Adlet tried to kick Hans away, but he dodged backward to evade it. “*Hrmeow!*”

A fiend was waiting for Hans before he could land. Its attack grazed his leg, knocking him off-kilter and causing him to bungle his landing and fall to the ground. Another fiend was waiting to thrust its claws into Hans’s stomach, sending a spray of blood over the dark ruins.

“You did good, fiend!” Chamo said with a smile. Her slave-fiends, Fremy, and Nashetania took over from there, driving Hans staggering into a corner.

“This is our chance. He’s wounded pretty badly,” said Fremy. “We can capture him now.”

This is bad, thought Adlet. Chamo’s attempts to kill Hans were an act, but the fiends were seriously trying to get rid of him. Adlet didn’t know what Chamo might do if Hans died. He also wouldn’t be able to get whatever Hans might have to help Fremy.

“...Don’t let him go. We’re gonna keep after him,” said Adlet.

Adlet made up his mind. He would accept Hans’s proposal. He would, as instructed, separate from the other Braves, Nashetania, and the fiends and talk with Hans alone. Right now, Hans was injured, so Adlet wouldn’t be at a disadvantage one-on-one. Then, Adlet would find out if Hans actually knew how to cancel the chain-death ability.

If he did, Adlet would disengage it and kill Tgurneu. Once Fremy was safe, Adlet wouldn’t mind confessing he was the seventh, as Hans had demanded, but if Hans didn’t know, Adlet would devote everything he had to eliminating him and Chamo. At that point, he would pass a secret message to Tgurneu and slaughter the other Braves.

As for the details, he’d have no choice but to play it by ear. Whatever the case, it was certain to be a tough fight.

But he was the strongest man in the world. No matter what the crisis, he would make sure Fremy was safe. As long as she was all right, the world—and

he—could go to hell for all he cared.

Hans kept running for some time after that, and Adlet's party lost sight of him. They illuminated the area with their light gems at max strength but saw neither hide nor hair of him.

There were no fiends nearby; it seemed they'd lost sight of Hans, too. He was formidably fast, despite his injury.

This is convenient, thought Adlet. Hans wanted to talk with him one-on-one, and Adlet meant to acquiesce to that demand.

"It doesn't look like we'll find him as a group. Fremy, Nashetania, I think we should split up for now," suggested Adlet.

Nashetania replied, "That's dangerous. We don't know which direction he might attack from."

"We'll keep from separating too far so we can quickly rush to help one another." Adlet instructed Nashetania to go east, while Fremy went south.

"Please be careful. And we're not secretly communicating with Hans," Nashetania added before she ran off eastward.

Just as Fremy was about to head south, Adlet ran up to her. "Be careful of Chamo. There's a chance Hans may be using her."

"...There's no way. She should understand who the seventh is."

"He can pull off the impossible," Adlet warned her. It hurt to be away from Fremy, even though it was necessary. And he had one more thing to tell her. "Fremy, if..." The words caught for a moment; this was a hard thing to say. "If I die, the plan fails, and you lose any way of escape. There's nothing you can do..."

"What are you trying to say here?"

"Surrender. You survive, at least." He didn't want to say it, but he couldn't be sure he would live through this. He had to tell her this before he died.

Dumbfounded, she stared at him.

Then she slapped him across the cheek. "...When did the strongest man in the

world give up?”

“I’m still the strongest man in the world. But even so...there are some battles you can win—and some you can’t.”

“Don’t give me that. I intend to fight to the death. To the bitter end—no matter what.”

He’d expected that reply, and that was exactly what made this so hard. “Give me a firecracker. For communication. If I set it off...that’s the signal that there’s nothing left to be done. If you see that, then surrender.” Another slap resounded off his cheek. Adlet offered his other cheek, too. “Hit me as many times as you like. Once you’re satisfied, give me a firecracker.”

Fremy raised her hand to slap him a third time. But then she lowered it. She manifested gunpowder in her hand—not as a firecracker but in the shape of a small board.

“Fremy, I—”

Fremy shoved the gunpowder board into his hand; then, without waiting for his reply, she turned away and ran off.

Adlet stroked his cheek. It wasn’t the way she’d looked at him before. Adlet could sense she hated him from the bottom of her heart. *But I don’t care if she hates me. It’s enough if she’s alive and happy*, he thought, burying his sorrow deep in his heart.

He tucked the gunpowder into one of his belt pouches and dashed off after Hans.

Hans revealed himself to Adlet, then fled, over and over. As Adlet pursued, he slowly moved farther and farther away from Fremy and Nashetania. Hans had insisted a one-on-one conversation, and Adlet didn’t want the others interrupting him.

There were fewer fiends coming after them now. Chamo had killed many, and the remainder had lost sight of Hans and Adlet. The fiends wouldn’t be getting in their way.

As Adlet sprinted, he scanned the area. He didn’t see any of Chamo’s slave-

fiends coming after him, and everything suggested Hans really did want to talk one-on-one. He must have figured the presence of slave-fiends would put Adlet on guard and keep him at bay.

“...*Hrmeow*.” Hans was watching him from the shadow of a tree, quietly pointing toward the center of the ruins. Only Adlet noticed him before he vanished again.

Adlet headed in that direction, making sure to avoid Nashetania’s and Fremy’s notice. The voices of the two women got farther away.

After running for what must have been about ten minutes or so, Adlet eventually came to a halt.

He stood in a place that had once probably been a town square for the ancients. There were no buildings for a hundred square yards, and only trees and weeds poked up here and there among the flagstones. On the edge of the square were some particularly large structures, maybe the estates of nobles or the churches of some long-dead religion.

This was about a mile and a half away from Mora’s position. Of course, at this distance, there was no sign of any fiends after them, either.

Adlet found Hans in the center of the square, crouching weakly. His face was pale, probably due to blood loss. Adlet approached cautiously and said to him, “I’ll agree to your deal, like you wanted. And you asked me to come alone, so here I am.”

“So what’ll ya do?”

“I don’t care what happens to me as long as Fremy is safe. I’m fine if you reveal to the others that I’m the seventh.”

“*Hrmeow* , so...”

“But! It’ll be after I’ve made sure you can actually save her from Tgurneu! Tell me, Hans! What do you know?!”

“Hold yer horses, *meow* . I’ve gotta tell ’em yer the seventh, or I’m as good as dead.”

“Shut up. Fremy’s all that matters. I don’t care about you or the other Braves

or the world.” Sword up, Adlet slowly closed on Hans. “I want so badly to kill you—you hurt her. I don’t care how little it was; you hurt her.” Then, before Adlet finished speaking, something moved off to his side. He turned and spotted a small fiend falling from high up in a tree, so he whipped his sword around to point at it.

But he quickly realized—the fiend was already dead. Its body had been tied up with string, the other end of which stretched toward where Hans had just been.

It was a trap to distract him. The moment Adlet realized it, he took a step back and tried to block Hans’s swing. Hans was slow enough for Adlet to deflect the blade. Hans rolled backward, and then, as Adlet was following up his last strike with a paralysis needle— *“Hrmeooow!”* Hans leaped, nothing like before, charging straight for Adlet with the strength of his arms alone. Adlet couldn’t believe it. Hans shouldn’t have been able to move.

Startled by the double-layered trick of the fiend corpse and Hans’s sudden comeback, Adlet was taken off guard. The pommel of Hans’s sword drove into Adlet’s stomach, making his lower body go numb. He pitched forward, and a fist smacked right behind his ear. The world spun.

“Sorry, Adlet. The truth is I don’t know any way to save her.”

Adlet looked at Hans’s stomach. He could have sworn he’d seen enough bleeding there to stop Hans in his tracks.

“That was rabbit’s blood. I ain’t fond of torturin’ animals, but push came to shove,” Hans said casually, pulling Adlet’s arms as far as they would go. Adlet’s joints creaked, and he felt weak. With his free hand, Hans struck Adlet in the stomach. When his mouth opened in a gasp, Hans shoved his fingers in and pushed something bitter and wriggling down to the back of his throat. *“Meow-hee-hee , good boy. Eat right up.”* Hans poured something down after it.

“Ya wanna neow what ya just swallowed? I’ll tell ya, Adlet. It’s one o’ Chamo’s slave-fiends. A real smart one, too. It’s monitorin’ ya from inside yer stomach. I’ve ordered it to kill ya right away if ya do anythin’ bad.”

“...That’s...ridiculous.”

“Neow ya can’t fight us.”

Until now, Adlet had intended to eliminate Hans and Chamo if need be. All he’d have to do was capture Hans and take Chamo by surprise and kill her, and Fremy would be okay. But now, he had no choice but to do as Hans said.

“Meow-hee. Let’s make a deal.”

Before launching his attack on Fremy, Dozzu, and Adlet, Hans had realized that just eliminating the Black Barrenbloom wouldn’t be enough to win this fight. Getting rid of Adlet, the seventh, couldn’t win the battle for him, either. Killing either one would still leave the root cause of their falling-out unresolved, and Tgurneu was sure to take advantage of that to kill the Braves.

In short, the only path to victory was to kill Tgurneu.

But Hans had no way to find the fiend. He didn’t have the muscle to break through its protections, either. So how to take it out?

The answer was simple: Adlet was the seventh, Tgurneu’s pawn. Hans just had to turn that around and use Adlet himself.

Hans released Adlet from where he’d pinned him and spoke to him kindly. “Listen, Adlet. It ain’t at all like I wanna let Fremy die. She’s a good woman. She’s sacrificin’ herself to serve her allies. I don’t wanna see no one like that kick the bucket.”

Adlet had been freed, but that didn’t mean he could resist. He had no choice but to listen.

“I get it. Ya ain’t on Tgurneu’s side. Ya just wanna protect Fremy, right? So we can work together to find a way to kill Tgurneu without givin’ up on ‘er. If we can do that, then we’re back to bein’ buddies, like before.”

“...Shit.” That made sense to Adlet. But it was impossible. If Adlet let Tgurneu die, Fremy would die, too. There was no way to undo the chain-death ability. Why else would he be so distressed?

“Neow then. I need to ask ya about yer little pickle here. What sorta power is bein’ used to keep Fremy hostage? When’d ya find out about it, and what’ve ya done so far?”

Adlet told him everything—they'd come up with a plan to kill Tgurneu and had been right about to put it into action. He told Hans about the chain-death ability afflicting Fremy and the woman's voice, probably the Saint of the Single Flower, telling him he was the seventh. And he told Hans he'd been about to send a secret message to Tgurneu, tipping it off, but that Hans and Chamo had prevented him from doing so.

"*Meow-hee* . So ya'll were right about to kill Tgurneu, eh? That makes things faster." Hans pointed his sword at Adlet. "Tell Tgurneu this. Hans and Chamo ain't a threat no more 'cause of you. Hans said he took Fremy as a hostage, but he was bluffin'. There ain't no risk he'll kill Fremy neow."

"And then...?"

"Leak a plan to Tgurneu—but neowt the real plan. Tgurneu'll think yer on its side and let its guard down, and we capture it and beat it."

What about this is a deal? thought Adlet. Hans was just pushing his demands on Adlet, wasn't he?

"But then Fremy will die," Adlet said.

Hans grinned. "Then we just don't kill Tgurneu. Its real body's a fig, right? If it ain't possessin' another fiend, it can't do neowthin'. So we just have to kill its host, knock the fig out without killin' it, and carry it away. You've got some tools that can stop a fiend in its tracks, at least, right?"

It was true; he did.

"Tgurneu'll have the rest of the hieroglyphs, so look at those to find a way to undo it. 'Cause if ya can just undo the Barrenbloom, there's neow reason to kill Fremy. Or ya could just find a way to cancel the chain-death ability. Long as that's gone, there's neow reason to let Tgurneu live, right?"

He had a point. But Adlet had already considered and abandoned that idea. "What do you plan to do if we can't find it? Or what if the only way to stop the Barrenbloom is to kill Tgurneu...and the chain-death ability can't be undone?"

"...What about it?"

“Besides, do you think Tgurneu will keep Fremy alive, right up until the end? Tgurneu holds her life in its hands.”

Hans thrust his sword in Adlet’s face. “Right neow, we’re the ones with ’er life in our hands.”

“Do you think we’ll be able to deceive it? If it decides she’s no longer useful —”

“I’ll say this one meowr time. Right now, we’re the ones with ’er life in our hands.”

Adlet fell silent. He couldn’t do a thing against Hans now.

“Listen, Chamo could kill Fremy while we’re here havin’ this chat.”

Adlet was helpless. Hans had wrangled him into complete surrender. He had to do what Hans said.

“This is where ya pull out all the stops, Mr. Strongest-Man-in-the-World. C’mon, you can manage it. And if ya don’t...it’ll only be mew and Fremy dyin’,” Hans said with a smile.

Meanwhile, Fremy was muttering, “...This is strange. Adlet should have come this way.” In the ruins, she’d been keeping an ear out for Adlet’s voice as they chased after Hans. But now, not only could she not find Hans, she couldn’t even see Adlet.

“Which direction did Hans go? He should have come this way,” Nashetania asked her. A moment earlier, the two had met up. Something was strange.

Fremy raised her light gem up high to illuminate the area. It would draw the fiends to their location, but it was a necessary risk. Finding Adlet was the top priority.

They had fallen for a trap. The enemy’s goal had been to isolate Adlet. Fremy had to assume that the hostage situation and Hans’s intentional revelation of it had all been for the sake of luring Adlet out.

That was when she heard the sound of swords clashing from the south—and Adlet’s voice. “Fremy, are you there? Come help me!”

Fremy’s and Nashetania’s heads jerked in that direction, but Adlet said

nothing after that. What they heard instead were the cries of fiends and Chamo's shouts.

"What happened, Chamo?" asked Nashetania.

A giant slug with Chamo astride was shoving through the underbrush toward them, and one of her slave-fiends carried the body of a fiend slung over its shoulder. "This one yelled in Adlet's voice, and the sound of the swords were this thing, too," Chamo spat. "It was a setup—by Hans and Tgurneu."

In other words, Adlet was facing Hans and the fiends all alone.

The ruined square was silent. No sign of anyone nearby: no people, no fiends, not even any animals. Hans was twirling his swords in his hands as he waited for Adlet's reply.

Adlet was thinking. Was there a way to eliminate Chamo and Hans and keep Fremy safe? Hans's plan was too dangerous.

But Hans wasn't going to give him time to scheme. "Make a decision, Adlet. If we don't do nothin', no tellin' what Chamo might do."

Adlet faltered. Was there no other choice but to do as Hans said?

Hearing Hans's next words, though, Adlet felt a strange wave of something he'd never experienced before.

"[One signal, and Chamo'll kill Fremy right away.]"

For some reason, Adlet could tell Hans was lying. He was certain that even if Hans gave the signal, Chamo would do no such thing. He was as certain of that as he was that the sun would rise in just over an hour.

The change in Adlet's expression stunned Hans a little. It seemed Hans himself wasn't aware of the phenomenon. "[What's up? Did somethin' happen?]"

"Say what you just said one more time, Hans."

"[Yeah, I'll say it as many times as ya like. Once I give the signal, Chamo'll kill Fremy. Ya ain't got time to be draggin' yer ass.]"

So it really had happened. Adlet saw clearly that Hans was full of it. Chamo wouldn't kill Fremy. The urgency was a ruse. Adlet had no idea what was going

on, but he knew if Hans was lying or telling the truth. “Did you just lie, Hans?” Adlet asked. His sudden change in attitude confused the other man.

After a second, a fiend emerged from the shadow of a structure. All at once, they could hear footsteps everywhere, and fiends were blocking all the roads that led into the square.

When had they been surrounded? Adlet hadn’t even had an inkling that the enemy was there.

“...Oh, that was close.” One fiend calmly approached the two of them. It looked half rat, half human, but there was no way Adlet could ever mistake that tone. That was Tgurneu.

It held a book in two limbs—Adlet couldn’t pin down whether they were arms or forelegs. Adlet’s eyes could see a faint haze issuing from the book. “Dear, dear...you’re a fearsome man, Hans. If I hadn’t had this hieroform, I don’t know what might have happened,” Tgurneu said with a smile.

Chapter 4

The
Suffering of
Those Who
Love

Chapter 4

The Suffering of Those Who Love

What would Tgurneu have to do to see people suffering from love? This thought had been a preoccupation for three hundred years. It always kept the question at the top of mind as it conceived its plan to bring down the Braves of the Six Flowers and whenever it approached humans in order to use them.

That was its only joy—its sole purpose in life.

Tgurneu had seen the faces of dozens, hundreds of humans. It was such fun disrupting their affections. When Tgurneu saw humans dirtying their hands with evil deeds for the sake of friends or lovers, its heart leaped. What a glorious thrill to manipulate the love of humans to make them its allies, only to discard them afterward.

But at the same time, Tgurneu had also come to feel less and less satisfied. Something was left unfulfilled. The spice was missing. Tgurneu wanted to see deeper despair on the faces of humans.

Ultimately, it hit upon an idea: Rather than entrapping a human to see his or her suffering face, Tgurneu would personally raise one who would show it the ultimate expression.

Tgurneu waffled as to what sort of human it should raise. Who would put the most satisfying expression on display?

For example, something like this: A girl was best. An immature and foolish girl—simple and kind. She would want to be loved but never would be. And this life should bring her despair. Sometimes, she would think she'd found love, but she would always be betrayed. She would believe she should give up her search but would always fail to do so.

When that girl met a boy who loved her from the bottom of his heart, how deeply would she come to love him? How strong would her desire be to protect him? What if Tgurneu was to disrupt their relationship and torture them at its whims? *Wouldn't that be amazing?* Tgurneu thought.

Or then how about this: A boy would be good. He would have to have an indomitable will and a righteous heart, the strength to never lose hope, no matter what, and the determination to sacrifice his own life.

Tgurneu would make that boy fall in love with a certain girl. And then, it would place that boy in a predicament: In order to save his beloved, he would have to give up his own life as well as the lives of everyone else he cared about except the girl.

How would he react faced with such a dilemma? Tgurneu so desperately wanted to see. As it put together its plans for fighting the Braves of the Six Flowers and as it considered how to use the Saint of the Single Flower, these ideas remained fixtures in its mind.

This was why Tgurneu had raised that boy and girl: Adlet Mayer and Fremy Speeddraw.

There had to have been some other, more certain way to kill the Braves of the Six Flowers. There had to have been some simpler strategy. But Tgurneu hadn't chosen such a path—hadn't even considered it an option.

And why not? Because victory was about crushing love, and any "victory" without that was worthless.

Tgurneu had tried exploiting the love of Mora Chester and Goldof Auora—and had failed. They were still alive, as were their loved ones. But Tgurneu had already forgotten about them. They had ultimately been nothing more than a mid-battle diversion.

Fremy and Adlet were Tgurneu's true goal and its reason for existing.

The moment Hans saw the fiends, he turned to run. A twitch of Tgurneu's finger, and the army set on him en masse.

Adlet was speechless, frozen in shock at Tgurneu's sudden appearance. He didn't know who to side with: Hans or Tgurneu. "Wait, Hans! Answer me! Were you lying?" he yelled.

Hans ignored him, dashing out of the square, jumping away from the fiends in his path to hide in the shadow of a ruined building. He must have intended to search for another escape route.

“Unfortunately, Hans, I won’t be letting you leave here alive,” said Tgurneu.

Hans slid around the fiends that surrounded him in an attempt to escape, but then, his feet stopped. In the darkness, Adlet could just barely see shining thread. It was tangled around the trees and ruins, surrounding the whole town square in a cocoon-like wall about a hundred yards in radius.

Hans’s sword flashed. But the elastic thread wouldn’t be cut. He swung at it two, three times but couldn’t escape, and fiends were closing on him from behind. He dashed up a ruined wall to try to get away, but the cocoon was above, too. With the fiends still on the offensive, Hans was forced to return to the square.

“So impatient, Hans. You must be wondering how your lie was suddenly exposed. Well, I’ll explain. So why not listen?” Tgurneu taunted, showing Hans a tiny book. “It was the power of this hieroform that revealed your lie. This special book has been imbued with the power of the Saint of Words. It’s called the Book of Truth.”

In a cold sweat, Hans silently heard him out.

“I used this hieroform to cast a spell on you just now. When this spell has been cast on someone, the truth or falsity of their words is laid bare to everyone who hears. If you speak truth, a listener will know it’s true. If you lie, your words will be known as lies. Even if the hearer knows nothing of the Book of Truth, the spell is still effective.”

“...Is that right?” Adlet muttered. So that was how he knew Hans had been lying.

“This hieroform’s power has limits. First of all, it can only be used so many times. And furthermore, as long as the speaker believes what they say is true, the one who hears them will take it as such, even if it actually is not. This is also the case if they believe they are lying. But still, Hans—it seems it’s most undeniably true that Chamo will not kill Fremy on your signal.”

Hans fell silent. He couldn’t afford to be careless with his words right now.

“You have to say *something* , or this conversation will end. Oh well. I suppose I have to cancel the spell. The effects wear off after ten minutes anyway... It’s

been undone. You may speak, Hans.” It didn’t appear Tgurneu had done anything to the Book of Truth. The hieroform could probably be activated and deactivated just by touching it and willing it so.

“*Meow* ...did ya really cancel it, Tgurneu? I don’t feel nothin’,” said Hans. Adlet couldn’t tell if he was lying or not. The spell must have been deactivated. Seeing the look on Adlet’s face, Hans seemed to figure that the spell had been lifted. “...That’s one helluva hieroform. Where’d ya get somethin’ like that?”

“I bought it—for an incredible sum. It cleaned out my coffers. Of course, the Saint of Words never would have imagined the book would fall into the hands of a fiend. Lucky for me, the Saint of Words of that era was a human easily enticed by money.”

Adlet didn’t give a fig about any of that. The real issue here was the revelation that Hans couldn’t kill Fremy with a signal. What did that mean? “Hans...can you not send a signal to Chamo? Or has Chamo not actually taken Fremy hostage?”

Hans said nothing. Adlet pressed him further. “It was a lie that you could kill me instantly, wasn’t it? Because if you could, you would have killed me long ago. What was that strange thing you made me swallow?”

“Just a bitter bug. Not a slave-fiend or neowthin’,” Hans said with resignation. His expression was no longer calm. This was the first time Adlet had ever seen him cornered.

“It couldn’t be, Hans...”

Hans gave a wry smile as if to say *So ya’ve figgered it out?*

“Does Chamo not know about your plan? She doesn’t believe you actually attacked her, does she?”

No response. That was the same as an affirmative.

Adlet trembled with rage. Pulling needles and bombs from his belt pouches, sword in hand, he slashed at Hans. This meant there was no longer a single reason to let Hans live. Fiends joined him to leap at Hans, and Hans did nothing to strike back. He just frantically evaded them.

Tgurneu observed the situation, arms crossed. “Good grief. You’re quite a

man, Hans Humpty. To think you would see through my whole plan and use it against me to boot. I was rather antsy for a moment there when you declared you'd taken Fremy hostage. I'd have preferred to stay somewhere safe the whole time. Simply luring me out to the battlefield was an outstanding feat on your part." With a glare at Adlet, Tgurneu said, "But Adlet, that was an unsightly performance. You were nearly deceived, and you put Fremy in danger."

Adlet didn't need Tgurneu to tell him that. It was unforgivable. Not what Hans had done but his failure to realize the truth, endangering Fremy.

"I didn't expect you to be such a formidable foe, Hans. I should have arranged for Fremy to kill you before the Evil God's awakening. I can't deny that I underestimated you, considering you a mere assassin. Well, what's done is done." Tgurneu smiled. The fiends were gradually closing in on Hans.

Then Hans shrieked. "*Meooooow!* Chamo! Fremy! Come get me! I'm right here! *Meow!*"

Adlet realized he was calling the Braves to him. Having failed with his hostage idea, it seemed he meant to kill Tgurneu right now. He was going to lure their allies to them so they could surround Tgurneu. *I have to help it escape*, Adlet thought.

Tgurneu noticed Adlet's gaze. "What? You're worried about me, Adlet? Oh, it's no problem," it said with a shrug.

Fremy stood there, frozen. Now that the mimicry expert was dead, it was silent around them. All they could hear were the cries of distant fiends and the wind. She could tell they had been lured quite far away from Adlet.

The three sprinted back the way they had come, and Chamo sent her slave-fiends out in all four directions.

"Please respond, Adlet! Where are you?!" Nashetania cried. Fremy inclined her ears, straining for the sound of Adlet's voice or a battle.

The moment she did, though, the group's collective hearing was bombarded by the cries of every fiend in the ruins. Some yelled gibberish, others called out to Fremy, while others sang. Their voices drowned out everything, including any potential leads to Adlet.

“Adlet! Where are you?!” Fremy screamed so hard she thought her throat might bleed. But she could hear no reply.

“*Hrmeeeeow!* Fremy! Chamo! At this rate, Adlet’s gonna die!” Hans bellowed for a while. No response. Adlet was relieved. It seemed Fremy and Chamo were quite far away. There was no risk that they would do anything to Tgurneu.

Adlet was going to kill Hans now and subsequently the rest of the Braves. Then, he would make Fremy surrender to the fiends. After that, she would be safe.

“Watch out, Adlet,” Tgurneu said, and just then, about ten fiends rushed at Hans. Another ten stood between him and Adlet.

“*Mreah!*” Hans repelled all their attacks with his sword, then kicked one into a stagger. He leaped onto and off its shoulder as he ran, his gaze locked on Adlet the whole time.

“Stay calm, Adlet, and get away from Hans!” Tgurneu called. That remark clued Adlet in to Hans’s goal. Among his various paraphrenalia, he had a whole panoply of items ideal for calling their allies: flash grenades, smoke bombs, regular bombs, and his fiend-calling flute. Hans intended to steal them.

“Don’t let him close! Destroy all your tools, Adlet!” Tgurneu yelled. Adlet jumped back, ripping the tools from his pouches.

“*Meow!*”

“Not just the flash grenades! Break them all, including the bombs and your flute!” Tgurneu called again.

Hans glided past the attacks in an attempt to snatch Adlet’s tools, but the fiends nearby just barely stopped him. Meanwhile, Adlet had thrown everything on the ground and was smashing them with his sword.

“Hand ’em meowver!” Skittering across the dirt like a cat, Hans reached for one of the discarded items. Before he could reach it, though, Adlet crushed his final flash grenade.

Specialist number eleven was among the fifty fiends in that square, lurking inconspicuously in Tgurneu’s shadow. *Now this is checkmate* , number eleven

thought, seeing Adlet's tools broken. It had been unlikely that Chamo or Fremy would discover them in the first place, and now, the chances were nil.

Hans must have been shocked that he, a seasoned warrior, would have failed to notice the approach of fifty foes. But that was number eleven's ability—a sort of hypnosis. It emitted a unique sound wave that prevented others from seeing it. It was a more developed version of the stealth ability.

The regular stealth ability's area of effect was about five hundred yards, more or less, and fiends that possessed it could only conceal themselves. But number eleven's ability had a range of dozens of miles, and it could hide more than just itself.

However, its ability was far less potent than the regular stealth ability. Anyone affected would have their attention diverted from number eleven's presence. They would be unable to focus on it or look right at it; they would unconsciously turn elsewhere. That was all. Number eleven couldn't make itself invisible, but the ability was still incredibly powerful.

Fremy and Chamo had to be desperately searching for Adlet and Hans right about now, but they wouldn't even begin to get close. Their feet would automatically take them in a different direction.

But number eleven's ability wasn't flawless. First off, the fiend couldn't disappear, so if you were distinctly aware that something was there and determined to head toward it, you could break the illusion easily. It was ultimately just a supplementary ability to use in concealing oneself.

But it had prevented Hans from summoning allies—so the Braves would never discover them.

Hans picked up the fragments of the crushed flash grenade, and Adlet sliced at him. Hans rolled backward to avoid his blade. Hans fumbled with the shards, trying to generate a flash, but it was no use. It was beyond repair.

Adlet checked his pouches again, making sure he had broken every single tool that could be used to call their allies.

"I wön't let you!" A fiend's claws stabbed toward Hans's back at the same instant Adlet threw a needle that grazed Hans's torso.

Hans gave up on his attempt at repair and tossed away the wreckage of the flash grenade. “Neowthin’ I can do ’bout it. Looks like help ain’t comin.’”

“My, Hans. Giving up already?” asked Tgurneu.

Adlet attentively held his sword at the ready.

Tgurneu, for its part, didn’t even adopt a fighting stance. “Why don’t you put more serious effort into calling for your allies? If you’re lucky, someone might come to save you, you know?”

Hans smiled back. “Are ya sure *mew* don’t need to call fer help? Ya think ya can stop me here with just fifty-odd fiends?”

“I think fifty is quite enough. Besides, Adlet is on my side. And most of all, so are the miracles of love.”

“*Meow-ha-ha-ha-ha!* Real funny guy.” Hans went straight for Tgurneu with his sword, but fiends immediately blocked his path. Adlet didn’t even have to do anything.

The young man had been watching the fiends fight. The unit under Tgurneu’s command was frighteningly powerful. On an individual level, they weren’t that strong, but they had an unusually competent chain of command and the ability to work together. About ten were protecting Tgurneu, while another ten stood in a group farther away, on standby. The rest were all going right for Hans.

Hans tried to find a break in the circle around him and cut toward Tgurneu, but the fiends maintained their line perfectly. Adlet could see no holes Hans might break through.

The Brave attempted to kill a fiend in the line in order to disrupt their formation, but they countered that, too. He darted in every direction in an attempt to create a one-on-one situation, but the fiends always responded by guarding one another. Whenever Hans found an opening, another fiend would step in from the side to defend its ally.

Adlet tried to join in the fight, but his imprudent attempt at interference had the opposite effect.

“You stay out of this, Adlet,” commanded Tgurneu.

Watching Hans's fight from a distance, Adlet considered. Hans was being backed into a wall. At this rate, it wouldn't be long before he succumbed. But had a man as sharp as Hans failed to predict this situation? Had he not predicted that Tgurneu might sense the threat he posed and come to kill him?

Most troubling of all, Adlet had yet to see any despair in Hans's eyes. Adlet was certain he had another card in his hand.

Hans was playing the part of the cornered hero, out of options after his machinations had failed, but that was a bluff—and Tgurneu was falling for it.

He had two plans. The first had been to blackmail Adlet into killing Tgurneu. That had been a total bust. There was no way he could have anticipated the existence of the Book of Truth. However, he'd taken the possibility of failure into account from square one.

His real plan was to lure Tgurneu out of hiding. Hans had predicted Tgurneu would conceal itself from the Braves, but not even Tgurneu could sit there and do nothing once it became aware that its own seventh could be used against it.

Everything about this was just as Hans had anticipated.

Inside Hans's pocket was the earthworm slave-fiend Chamo had sent out. It was hidden in his clothing—tied up like a ribbon.

The messenger earthworm had heard everything: Hans threatening Adlet, the conversation with Tgurneu, and where Tgurneu was. The messenger earthworm was smart enough to make its own decisions and report everything to Chamo. So if Hans quietly released the restrained earthworm while Tgurneu and the fiends weren't looking, it would slip out past the cocoon and return to Chamo.

The reason Hans was fighting the fiends now was to gauge their abilities, and he'd tried to steal that flash grenade from Adlet to convince Tgurneu that he was at the end of his rope.

"Mrow! Damn it, ya cheeky bastards!" Hans ran the circumference of the barrier, concealing himself in the shadows of the ruins. The fiends couldn't keep track of every move he made. He was certain there would be a chance for him to release the earthworm.

Pretending to evade the attacks, he hid himself in a shadow of a building. But

then, right when he was putting his hand into his pocket, about to release the earthworm— “Dear me, what’s wrong, Adlet?” he heard Tgurneu ask. Adlet was barreling toward him.

Adlet figured Hans had some way to contact the others, but he had no Saint’s power—or any tools like Adlet. That meant the means at his disposal were extremely limited. Chamo had to be his only option. Once he realized this, Adlet recalled that one earthworm slave-fiend had discovered him back in the Phantasmal Barrier. Was it perhaps lurking nearby? Or was Hans carrying it?

“Don’t let any earthworms escape this cocoon!” Adlet yelled as he used his light gem to illuminate the area and spotted an earthworm slave-fiend slithering at full speed along a crack in the flagstones.

Adlet threw the pain needles in his right hand at the creature, but Hans batted them all away with his sword. The instant before the earthworm would have slipped out of the thread cocoon, Adlet launched the needle in his left hand.

Hans tried to block it, too, but Tgurneu seized that moment to swing at Hans from behind, allowing Adlet’s pain needle to pierce Chamo’s minion inches before it got away. The worm writhed, spewing fluid from its mouth.

“Stop the slave-fiend!” Adlet shouted as Tgurneu plucked up the earthworm between its fingers. The fiend tied up the pest and kneaded it a bit so it couldn’t move.

Hans’s sword arced toward Tgurneu’s fingers, but Adlet blocked it. When Hans lunged forward in an attempt to reclaim his messenger, the fiends held him at bay.

“...Phew, that was close. So you still had another trick up your sleeve? I really can’t take my eye off you,” Tgurneu said, summoning a fiend on standby a ways away. The bat-fiend approached Tgurneu’s side and took the earthworm slave-fiend in its mouth.

“Go discard it somewhere far away,” said Tgurneu. “Toss it into the sea or something.”

The bat soared through a hole open in the top of the cocoon and flew away.

With the fiends holding him back, Hans was unable to stop it.

Hans was acting cool as ever, but Adlet could clearly see fear behind his smile. For the first time, Adlet was seeing Hans after he really had exhausted every avenue.

With a swipe of Tgurneu's finger, about forty fiends descended on the catlike assassin. Hans snapped out of his momentary reverie and rushed to fight back.

Meanwhile, ten fiends had gathered around Tgurneu. Adlet understood that they meant to defend their commander. There was a spider-fiend that spat silk, a stolid hippo-fiend, a small goat-fiend, a bipedal fiend with a beautiful bird face, a great ape-fiend with four arms, and a few others. Encircling their leader, they kept their eyes fixed on Hans as he fought.

"Tgurneu!" Adlet ran up to it. Tgurneu's guard didn't seem wary of him.

Clenching his sword, Adlet stood in front of Tgurneu. This course of events had forced him to cooperate with Tgurneu to take down Hans, but Tgurneu wasn't truly an ally. "Tgurneu...let me ask you one thing."

"What is it?"

"What will you do with Fremy once you've beaten the Braves?" The only reason Adlet was protecting Tgurneu at all was because Fremy's death was linked to his. If Tgurneu meant to kill her, they would have to fight, after all.

Tgurneu gently touched its own chest. "[I have no intention of killing Fremy. I won't allow anyone under my command to touch her, either.]"

Adlet was convinced it was telling the truth. It seemed Tgurneu had enchanted itself with the Book of Truth. "That's...a relief." That had been his last worry. Seeing how Tgurneu coldly and mercilessly discarded its own subordinates, Adlet worried it might dispose of Fremy the same way.

"The truth is, Tgurneu, we put together a plan to kill you. Have you figured it out?"

"Oh, I'd predicted you were plotting something, but I hadn't quite gotten what," said Tgurneu. It seemed it had already dispelled the effects of the Book.

"That's not good. They're ready to pull the trigger at any moment at this

stage. I just pushed them to put it on hold. I don't know when the others will go through with it. I'm gonna tell you what it is, so you have to come up with a countermeasure as soon as possible. If you die...Fremy will...die, too." Adlet was angry at Tgurneu. Taking Fremy hostage, using her, hurting her—those were unforgivable sins. But her life was more important than revenge.

"Oh, do tell me. But are you sure, Adlet? I'm your enemy, the one who destroyed your home village."

"Why the hell are you bringing that up? That doesn't matter. Don't interrupt."

"I've given orders to a certain fiend to kill all the Braves, aside from Fremy. In about one hour, it will carry out that order. If the Braves are to have any chance at victory, they must carry out their strategy before that fiend kills the lot of them. Simple as that."

"...So what?"

"You don't mind? If you leak your strategy to me, the Braves of the Six Flowers are done for. Your chances of victory will be zero. You'll have a tough time even surviving. The fate of the Braves of the Six Flowers and the world rests on the choice you make now."

"I'm telling you, I don't care! The only way I can keep Fremy safe is to kill the Braves!"

"I've still got some questions for you. You don't mind betraying her? She'll be heartbroken."

Tgurneu's seemingly kind tone made Adlet's heart waver, and the hesitation he thought he'd overcome tortured him again. How angry would she be? She'd believed in him. How much would she mourn the deaths of Rolonia and Mora? Thinking about it made Adlet feel as if his heart would tear to shreds. "...I don't care. I'm not going to care."

"Why not?"

"Fremy barely knows the Braves. We only met less than ten days ago. I'm sure she'll mourn for a while, but she'll forget us quickly. I'm sure she already hates me now. Humanity being destroyed won't hurt her one bit. Going back to the fiends will make her happiest."

“...I see.” Then Tgurneu’s mouse-shaped face twisted into a smile that would make anyone shudder. “But don’t tell me about your plan yet, Adlet. There’s one more thing I have to ask you.” Shivers ran down Adlet’s spine.

“Have you never questioned why you’re the seventh?”

“...Huh?”

“I sent you to the Braves of the Six Flowers to make you protect Fremy. You worked so hard for me. In the Temple of Fate, you deceived your allies for me, and you came to me without alerting any of them to your true intentions. Aside from falling for Hans’s tricks, you have met all my expectations. If you weren’t the seventh, Fremy would have died long ago.

“But isn’t it strange? Why did I think you would protect her?”

When Adlet had discovered he was the seventh, he’d wondered why but had quickly decided it wasn’t important. Finding a way to protect Fremy was his first priority. “That’s...”

“Did you receive any orders from me? No, you did not. Are you on my side? No, you’re my enemy. So then, why did I believe you would protect her? It’s strange, isn’t it? So very peculiar.” Tgurneu studied Adlet’s face.

Suddenly, Adlet’s back began trembling, and he realized he’d been subconsciously avoiding the topic.

“Hey,” prodded Tgurneu, “when you found out that Fremy was the Brave-killer, did you feel wary of her?”

“...What is this about?”

“When seven people gathered within the Phantasmal Barrier, did you suspect her even slightly? When Rolonia appeared, did it ever cross your mind Fremy might perhaps be the seventh?”

“...What are you talking about?!”

“Where did you first meet her? What was the trigger that led to your encounter? What did you feel when you first laid eyes on her?”

Adlet’s blood was boiling with rage—an attempt to smother the fear crawling up from the depths of his heart. “What does that have to do with this?! I’m

gonna tell you our plan! Listen! If you die, Fremy will, too! What are you gonna do if they deploy it right now?!”

“This is very important, Adlet. I don’t know where you two met, but I do know what you were feeling then. You wanted to protect her from the moment you crossed paths, and you never suspected her, not even once.”

“So...so what?!”

“I’ll tell you. Because you are under my control, and you have been ever since I chose you as my seventh four years ago.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Let me tell you my ability: It’s the power to control human love.”

A gasp wheezed from Adlet’s lungs. He couldn’t suppress his terror.

“You don’t *actually* feel true love for Fremy at all. You’re simply under my control. I made you love her.”

At Tgurneu’s side, number eleven was listening to its commander’s conversation with Adlet. It was shocked by what it heard. What point was there in telling all this to Adlet now? Shouldn’t learning about the Braves’ gambit be the priority?

Number eleven recalled a conversation with the three-winged fiend about a month ago.

The three-winged fiend hadn’t been given a specialist number, but it was Tgurneu’s confidant, privy to all the commander’s schemes. It was also one of the few fiends allowed to advise Tgurneu directly.

“I believe I’ll die soon. So I’ve decided to leave my final wörds to you, since you’ll be closest to the Cómmander on the day of the inevitable final bättle ,” the three-winged fiend had confided. *“Cómmander Tgurneu’s specialty is pläns that use enemies’ émotions, and the Cómmander enjoys crüshing their hearts, too. But though it may be rüde to say this, sometimes tormenting enëemies dístracts Cómmander Tgurneu, and he makes irrational déciisions. When that häppens, screw up your courage and tell the Cómmander plainly to get a grip.”*

Number eleven looked at Tgurneu’s face. This was one of those times, wasn’t

it?

Tgurneu suddenly turned away from Adlet to address number eleven. “What are you thinking about, number eleven? Am doing something strange in your view?” Tgurneu inquired before number eleven could even speak. Number eleven figured there was no cause for concern. Commander Tgurneu was calm. This conversation wasn’t as pointless as it seemed.

“...What’re they talkin’ about?” Hans muttered as he dodged the fiends’ attacks. He could just barely hear the conversation.

Hans had assumed Adlet would leak the plan immediately and that stopping him would be impossible. Tgurneu was dragging this pointless conversation on and on, though, telling Adlet about its ability.

“*Hrmeow* ...Tgurneu’s getting’ careless.” Hans smiled. All his ploys had fallen apart, and he’d failed to use Adlet to get rid of Tgurneu. It had become practically impossible to summon Chamo to their location. All his escape routes were blocked. The situation seemed hopeless.

But if Tgurneu was getting careless, Hans had a chance at winning. He just had to kill Adlet before he spilled his guts.

Adlet had said the others had already set up a scheme to orchestrate Tgurneu’s demise, and Tgurneu wasn’t aware what it was. Hans would silence Adlet to plug the leak; then, once the other Braves carried out their plan, they’d be free to kill Tgurneu.

“Meowr!” Hans cut down one of the fiends surrounding him and attempted use the disturbance in their coordination to break through Tgurneu’s defensive line. The line was too solid for the loss of a single fiend to disrupt it, but Hans still managed to break through, taking hits as he charged for Adlet.

“Stop him,” Tgurneu calmly ordered. The spider-fiend beside the commander spewed thread from its mouth, walling off the corner of the square where Adlet and Tgurneu stood.

“*Meow!*” Hans stopped, tangled in the webbing. Fiends rushed him from the rear, and he only barely escaped, wounding his back along the way.

“Damn it...what do I do?” Hans muttered.

Tgurneu was conferring with the goat-fiend. Hans had tried to kill Adlet, but the web wall had prevented that. Adlet watched the events out of the corner of his eyes, but now was not the time for any of it. Tgurneu's words were still making his head spin.

It had the power to control love. Adlet didn't understand what those words meant. His mind refused to...

...because when he'd first met Fremy, something had stirred heart-pounding affection within him—her tragic expression, the sadness in her eyes. That's why Fremy felt so dear to him. And as they'd fought together and protected each other, those feelings had grown even stronger.

When they found out what the Black Barrenbloom really was and Fremy had been on the verge of killing herself, Adlet had hurt as if his own body were being ripped apart. He'd decided to keep her safe at the cost of everything else.

His desire to protect her hadn't come from an order. It came from within.

"Not so, Adlet," Tgurneu insisted. "I was manipulating you. I compelled you to fall in love with Fremy the moment you met."

That's a lie, thought Adlet. Fremy was so important to him. She was more valuable to him than anything in the world; he knew it.

"You value her more than the whole world—but that's because I made you feel that way. She's not worth the world. You're the only one out there who believes that." Tgurneu's lips curled in a bloodcurdling smile. "If I hadn't been controlling you, you would have thought nothing of her. You would have suspected her immediately. You would have taken her for an uncanny cross between human and fiend—judged her selfish and self-centered to have survived despite all the blood on her hands. That's how you would have seen her. A creature beyond redemption.

"But you loved her. You betrayed the entire world for her sake—because I induced you to do so."

I refuse to believe this, thought Adlet. That was the one thing that was absolutely impossible. He loved her of his own free will. His betrayal had been his decision.

“If you won’t believe it, then I’ll help,” Tgurneu said, trailing its fingers gently across Adlet’s forehead. A split second later, a shock ran through him. He felt as if he’d been punched in the head.

Instantly, Adlet remembered—how once, he’d made up his mind to abandon everything for the sake of revenge. How he’d sworn to fight for Rainer, for Schetra, and for the villagers who’d been taken from him. How much it had hurt when he’d heard that all the villagers had died, just an afternoon earlier. Rainer died in front of him that evening; his feelings for his friend had been so unbearable, he’d wept aloud.

All the old emotions that had vanished from his mind were revived inside him.

“I...”

He’d failed to trust Rolonia—and Mora, Goldof, Chamo, and Hans. Just moments ago, he’d been trying to kill them, without any hesitation or doubt. They were all weirdos, constantly making things harder for him. But that was exactly why he’d valued them as allies.

Adlet remembered the people of the world. Seeing them on the roads, living their quiet lives, and peacefully spending their days in their villages... He’d vowed that he would never let those places end up like his home.

Adlet’s knees collapsed. His sword fell to the ground. He understood now just what a frightening thing he had been about to do. He couldn’t stop trembling. He couldn’t breathe. He just barely managed to keep himself from bawling and crying out his sister’s name.

“I’ll give you a chance,” said Tgurneu. “a reward for keeping Fremy safe until now and fighting through this. I’ll give you the opportunity to kill the creature you hate so much.”

Adlet quickly picked up his fallen sword again. He tried pointing it at Tgurneu, but his hand wouldn’t stop trembling, and the blade’s tip wavered in the air.

He was being controlled. He could no longer deny it. Thinking back on his earlier behavior, it was beyond doubt. But he still didn’t want to believe it. His desire to protect the person he loved was more important than anything. He didn’t want to believe those emotions were fake.

“What’s wrong, Adlet? You’re not going to?” Tgurneu kindly spread its hands.

Seeing that, Adlet tightened his grip around the hilt of his sword and stilled his trembling, remembering what he had to do. “You’re an idiot. You’re basically committing suicide. Why would you put me back in my right mind when you went to all that trouble to control me?”

Tgurneu was just three feet away from the tip of Adlet’s sword. One push forward, and Adlet’s blade would pierce its body. The fiends trembled, but Tgurneu restrained them with a hand. Adlet thrust his sword at Tgurneu.

But right before Adlet’s blade reached the creature’s flesh, it stopped. “... This...can’t be.” The words slipped from Adlet’s mouth. He knew his feelings for Fremy were just lies that had been implanted there by Tgurneu. But he still couldn’t take Tgurneu’s life.

If he did, Fremy would die, too. That fact held him in check.

“Suicide? I would never do such a thing. I know you can’t kill me,” Tgurneu said, bursting into laughter full of pleasure and joy. Gently, Tgurneu touched its hand to Adlet’s face. “I love to see human faces. I love to see them suffering from love.” Tgurneu continued stroking Adlet’s cheek as the boy stood, still as a statue. “Watching you go mad with love is not at all interesting to me. What I want to see on your face is the agony it brings you.

“I haven’t undone the ability I used on you. I’ve just weakened my control over your love—a little bit. Fremy is dear to you, isn’t she? You want to protect her, don’t you? Even though you know I’m the one who planted those feelings.”

“Tgurneu...you...”

“That’s a wonderful expression, Adlet. Worth all the effort I put into it,” Tgurneu continued, and Adlet just stood there, unable to swipe away the hand caressing his face.

“Adlet! Have ya opened yer damn eyes?!” Hans yelled. Tgurneu and Adlet were fenced off from him by the thread wall, but Hans could still hear them. He didn’t know why, but Tgurneu had deliberately revealed the truth to Adlet. Hans couldn’t waste this opportunity. “What’re ya doin’?! Kill it!”

Adlet didn’t reply.

“Remember, you’ve been fightin’ to kill Tgurneu! That’s why ya devoted yer whole life to gettin’ strong, right?! Are ya just gonna sit there and waste yer chance?!”

Adlet didn’t move. He just held his sword, gazing at Tgurneu. Hans realized the boy’s feelings for Fremy still had a hold on him.

“Have ya forgotten yer friend in the Dead Host?! Didn’t ya make up yer mind to get revenge?! Send that thing to hell, Adlet!” Hans wanted to slap him in the face to make him open his eyes. But Adlet was separated from him by the wall of thread, and the fiends attacking Hans wouldn’t give him a moment to reach the other man.

Adlet was rattled. *Calm down*, he told himself. Learning of his identity as the seventh and Tgurneu’s manipulation had flipped his world upside down, but he couldn’t just freeze in confusion. He had to find a way out of this.

Since Tgurneu was controlling him, maybe he couldn’t decide to kill Fremy, but he still had options. He could find a way to kill Tgurneu without letting Fremy die.

“I have a guess as to what you’re thinking,” said Tgurneu. “You must be trying to think up a way to avoid this decision entirely. So I shall inform you as to your current predicament.” Adlet saw a haze of light well in Tgurneu’s chest. It seemed Tgurneu had used the Book of Truth to cast the spell on itself again. “[The power of the Black Barrenbloom will soon terminate all crests aside from yours and Fremy’s. There are only four ways to stop that: my choosing to stop it, Fremy’s death, my death, or breaking the gem inside my body on which the hieroglyphs are carved.

“[However, the hieroglyph-carved gem cannot be removed from me without my death. And of course, I will never deactivate the Black Barrenbloom, no matter what happens.]”

The truth of its words was communicated to Adlet.

“[If I die, Fremy will also die. I’m certain it’s impossible for you, Dozzu, or Fremy to find any way to undo the chain-death power—because I don’t even know how to cancel it, myself. The only one who could would be the fiend that cast that ability, but I’ve already killed that one personally.]” Tgurneu continued

speaking, though it had apparently canceled the spell. “You have only two options: Abandon Fremy and save the world, or keep her safe and destroy it. I am convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt. There is no way for you to protect both her and the world.”

Adlet fell silent. It was just as Tgurneu said. No matter how he racked his brain, he couldn’t think of anything. It was impossible to protect both Fremy and the Braves.

“Choose one. Will you protect Fremy or the other Braves of the Six Flowers?”

If he was forced to choose, then the answer was clear. If all the Braves aside from Fremy were to die, then the world would end. He had no choice but to give up on her.

But even so, his body wouldn’t move.

Adlet loved Fremy. Even though he knew that love was a lie, it still hurt too much to let her die. His heart was being crushed between the pain of failing to kill this creature and the agonizing prospect of losing Fremy.

He couldn’t choose either—not Fremy’s death, not Tgurneu’s survival.

Tgurneu trembled in joy as it gazed upon Adlet’s expression. *Wonderful*. This was the visage of a human faced with the choice between love and the whole world. If Tgurneu let this chance slip through its fingers, it would never again be able to bask in such a sight.

“<Cómmander Tgurneu.>”

But then number eleven boorishly opened its mouth. This was so displeasing that Tgurneu thought about striking it down on the spot but abstained, figuring that would really be a rather bad idea.

“<We müst quickly ask Adlet about their plan. If they gö through with it, your life will be in dänger.>”

That was indeed true. Tgurneu wouldn’t be able to bear having this wonderful moment interrupted. It had to make the other Braves behave.

Tgurneu cast the Book of Truth’s spell on the white bird-fiend beside it. “<There’s something I want you to tell Fremy,>” Tgurneu whispered in code to

the fiend.

Fremy scoured the ruins, panting. She called out to Adlet again and again, but no reply came, and she couldn't even pick up any sounds of battle. All the fiends scattered throughout the ruins wailed so loudly, it was impossible to isolate Adlet's voice from among them.

It was a mistake to chase Hans, Fremy thought regretfully. They'd been so close to victory and had let it slip through their fingers so easily.

She was angry at Adlet for making the decision to go after Hans. No matter what he said, Fremy understood what was really in his heart. He'd done it to save her and had wound up caught in his trap.

"Fremy!" Nashetania ran up to her, Chamo following close behind. The three hid in the shadows while the slave-fiends kept watch over the area. They spoke quietly so as not to alert the enemy.

"It's impossible to find Adlet now," said Nashetania. "We were probably led in the wrong direction."

What should we do? Fremy thought impatiently. By now, Hans could have already captured Adlet. Now that it had come to this, they had to just make a decision. "We're going back to Dozzu and Rolonia. We'll carry out the plan."

Nashetania gave her a somber look. "But...that would be dangerous. Adlet might have leaked information about it."

"If Adlet believed he knew anything, he would have given the signal to call off the attack. That's why I gave him a firecracker. It hasn't gone off, so that means nothing's been leaked yet. Adlet isn't too stupid to pop one firecracker."

"...It's still too dangerous."

Fremy was aware. But if they just kept running like this, Adlet would be killed.

It was all her fault they'd ended up in this predicament. Fremy couldn't handle the idea of anyone dying because of her, least of all Adlet. "If we have to retreat, we can still do that later. Right now, we have to do this, Nashetania."

"Do this? Do what?" Chamo asked, her expression puzzled.

"We arranged a ploy to kill Tgurneu," said Fremy. "We encountered a few

obstacles that put it on hold, though.”

“If you’ve got a plan, then do it. Chamo’ll leave Tgurneu to you guys and kill Hans.”

“We intend to. Leave it to us—Tgurneu is going down.”

But Nashetania was still reluctant. “...I believe it’s no bluff that Tgurneu has a hold on your life.”

“I don’t care. I’ll throw away my life any time if it’s to kill that fiend,” insisted Fremy.

“...We would like to avoid the deaths of as many Braves as possible. We need you.”

“Even if I die, you’ll still have the others. That should be enough.” Fremy was about to head back to Dozzu with a reluctant Nashetania when she heard a voice coming from above. Looking up, she saw a white bird-fiend soaring through the air.

Fremy was surprised. She thought she’d killed all but two of the aerial fiends. The fiend crying out now was neither of those survivors.

“[Mëssage for the Braves! Adlet has fällen into Cómmander Tgurneu’s clutches!]

A strange phenomenon occurred then. Fremy was certain the bird-fiend’s message was true, sure beyond a shadow of a doubt. Chamo and Nashetania looked at each other. It seemed the same thing had happened to them, too.

“[Now böth Fremy and Adlet are our höstages! A curse has been cäst upon him!]

Fremy gulped. So Adlet had been captured after all. But Fremy had been thinking there still had to be a way to save him. The fiend’s message was her worst nightmare.

“[Listen wëll! If Cómmander Tgurneu dies, then Fremy dies, and if Fremy dies, sö does Adlet! Even if Ädlet is freed, the curse on him will nöt be úndone!]

The fiend’s words were unbelievable. Fremy had no idea what ability Tgurneu had used on Adlet. The voice of the white bird-fiend carried a mysterious

power, though, and Fremy couldn't doubt it was true.

"What was that?"

"I believe that was the power of the Saint of Words." Nashetania answered Chamo's question. "I'd say an application of her power to prevent lies, most likely."

Fremy raised her gun. She would shoot down that fiend, capture it, and then demand information about Adlet and Tgurneu. The moment she fixed her aim, though, the white bird-fiend gave a particularly loud screech, stopped flapping, and plunged to the ground.

Not long after, a slave-fiend of Chamo's retrieved the body. It had shattered its own core with a claw. Having accomplished its goal, it had killed itself.

"That wasn't a lie?" asked Fremy. "Not a technique to make someone believe a lie is truth?"

"I don't believe the Saint of Words would have such an ability," asserted Nashetania. "You should understand, too, Fremy, that it was telling the truth."

She was right. They didn't know what Tgurneu had done to Adlet, but it was a fact that Adlet would die if she did.

"...He was weak," said Chamo. "So Adlet's gonna die, too, huh? Well, too bad. Doesn't matter how Tgurneu fights, we've gotta kill it. You're okay with that, right, Fremy?"

"...Chamo." Nashetania was wavering.

Fremy realized she was trembling. She squeezed her own shoulders tight.

Tgurneu could just barely hear the dying cry of the white bird-fiend. It seemed it had fulfilled its duty properly.

The message Tgurneu had sent them was all true. If Fremy died, Adlet would die, too. Even now, Tgurneu was using its power to force Adlet to love her. His heart wouldn't be able to withstand her death. He would either kill himself, or his broken heart would kill him.

But Tgurneu hadn't told them everything. Fremy surely misunderstood. She must believe that, since Adlet had been captured, Tgurneu had put something

into his body that would kill him instantly upon Fremy's death. But that wasn't the case. Tgurneu's message had been true for some time.

But either way, Fremy had been informed that Adlet was in danger. She knew he would die if she did, so Tgurneu understood quite clearly what she would do now.

"What, you're getting cold feet, Fremy?" Chamo asked icily. "It's so obvious. So obvious, it's like, is Tgurneu stupid? It's trying to buy time. It wants to kill all the Braves with the power of the Black Barrenbloom while we're busy trying to save you and Adlet. We don't have time for all this waffling. If you guys have a plan, do it now. Tgurneu's gotta go."

"...I know. I know that, Chamo." But Fremy couldn't move.

Fremy had told Adlet time and time again that they couldn't afford to fear making sacrifices now. She'd told him to make sure they killed Tgurneu. But she'd always assumed that the sacrifice would be her. She'd been trying to tell Adlet not to put the others in danger in an attempt to protect her.

She'd never considered he would be a sacrifice.

"Are you gonna keep waiting until we all die, Fremy?" demanded Chamo.

"...The plan..." *will go forward*, Fremy started to say, but her mouth stopped, and then, other words slipped out. "...can't happen yet."

"...Chamo's had it with you." The diminutive Saint's voice was filled with anger.

"The fiend said that if Tgurneu dies, I die, and it's clearly about this...this red mark. It just said that I die if Tgurneu does, and Adlet dies if I do. So if I can cure this, we can kill Tgurneu without my death. And then, Adlet will be safe, too."

"I agree that much is true," said Nashetania. "But..."

"We've ignored it so far. But maybe there's a way to undo it. Let's go see Rolonia and have her really examine it one more time. She might find something, some way..."

"Whatever," Chamo spat. "Chamo's not expecting anything now. Chamo's gonna kill Tgurneu. And Hans, too. You're all nothing but idiots!" Chamo started

leaving.

Nashetania called after her. “Take this, Chamo. If you find Tgurneu, please throw this in the air. We’ve agreed to all gather on that signal.” Nashetania handed the flash grenade tucked under her armor to Chamo. Scowling and grumpy, Chamo took it and slipped it into a belt pouch. Then, without a backward glance, she left the ruined building.

“Fremy, for now, let’s meet up with Rolonia to find a way to cure that red mark. Dozzu might know something,” said Nashetania.

Without a word, Fremy drew her gun and pointed it at Nashetania. “Spit it out. Everything.”

Nashetania’s eyes widened. She raised her one arm, indicating she wasn’t going to attack. “...Spit what out?”

“It looks to me like you two knew this would happen. You wanted me to be a hostage and Adlet to get captured. You were pretending to obey him to achieve that goal. I can’t see it any other way.”

“Fremy...”

“What are you plotting? Were you going to take advantage of our fight with Tgurneu to kill us all? Or is your plan for us to finish one another off?” Fremy aimed for Nashetania’s forehead. At this range, Nashetania would never be able to dodge it.

But Nashetania sighed quietly. “You’re a fool, Fremy.”

It was true that Nashetania and Dozzu had ulterior motives, as Fremy said. Those motives, however, were a far cry from what Fremy imagined. Nashetania and Dozzu absolutely had to get Tgurneu out of their way, too, and the Braves of the Six Flowers’s help was vital to that goal. They would never try to entrap the Braves.

And it wasn’t enough to just kill Tgurneu. Nashetania and Dozzu had to make sure as many of the Braves survived as possible. Why? Because once this fight was over, Cargikk would make its move. And they needed to ensure the Braves’ fight with Cargikk lasted as long as it could.

Three days ago, while she and Dozzu had been searching for the Braves, Dozzu had said to her, “If there were six Chamos going to fight Cargikk and I had to bet which side would win, I would, without hesitation, bet on Cargikk.”

Even with all six Braves, Nashetania doubted they stood a chance against Cargikk. Without Adlet’s wits and Fremy’s long-range attack skills and raw power, fighting that fiend was a doomed enterprise.

That was why both Nashetania and Dozzu were putting everything they had into trying to take out Tgurneu. They had placed their trust in Adlet and cooperated as much as possible. They hadn’t been ready for Hans’s scheme, and they had no way of knowing how to deal with it.

Nashetania stepped close to Fremy, leaving herself vulnerable to the barrel aimed her way. “We must defeat Tgurneu, or we’re done for, too. And we must have all the Braves of the Six Flowers survive. That was why we cooperated with Adlet’s plan. We’ve used every means available to us for this purpose, and we have revealed everything we can reveal to you.”

Fremy ground her teeth silently.

“To tell the truth, Dozzu came up with a plot to take advantage of this opportunity to kill three of you. He thought we simply ought to accomplish one of two possible objectives: defeat Tgurneu or kill three Braves.

“But I made Dozzu rescind that option. I insisted we should put every effort into defeating Tgurneu, and he accepted that.” Nashetania drew closer to her. “Do you understand why? It’s because nothing would be more dangerous than straddling the fence between two half measures. I believe that if we cooperate, we’re sure to succeed with Tgurneu. So we bet everything on that. We’ve entrusted our lives, the fulfillment of our ambitions, the fate of the world—everything—to our united front with you.”

“But still, I—”

“If you can’t trust me no matter what, then go ahead. I was foolish for having trusted you. That is all.”

Fremy quietly lowered her gun.

“...Unfortunately, Fremy, I have no plan for getting us out of this, either. I

have no idea how to save you or Adlet.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

Fremy and Nashetania left the ruined building and headed north, where Dozzu and the others would be.

“I know there will be a way. It’s not yet hopeless. We can’t give up,” said Nashetania. She was reassuring herself, too.

It was too late to switch over to try killing the Braves instead. They had no strategy to catch them by surprise—no preparations. Nashetania and Dozzu would be killed before they could take out three Braves.

Nashetania had zero choice but to help Fremy now, too.

Tgurneu stood on the edge of the ruined town square with Adlet on his knees before it. On the far edge, Hans was battling with fiends.

Tgurneu was certain Fremy would never go through with the plot. The other allies would surely insist that Tgurneu was the top priority, even if that meant abandoning Adlet to his fate. But Fremy would reject that idea. Right about now, she would be trying to remove the effects of the chain-death ability.

Why? Because she couldn’t kill Adlet, the one person in the world who loved her from the bottom of his heart. He was the only thing that supported her heart. She was starved for love.

“...Wonderful,” Tgurneu muttered. Adlet loved Fremy, and Fremy loved Adlet. The devoted couple were desperately trying to save each other’s lives.

And their love was keeping Tgurneu safe. If either one abandoned their beloved, Tgurneu would be in danger. But given their feelings for each other, they could never do that. Fremy would keep searching for a way to undo the chain-death ability until the end. Even if she understood it was a futile struggle, she would be unable to abandon Adlet.

Her love for Adlet would drive the Braves to their doom.

A long time had passed. Adlet’s raised sword had not moved an inch closer to Tgurneu.

Adlet had watched the white bird-fiend fly off, but Tgurneu and its minion had

been speaking in code. He didn't know what they'd said.

"...Damn it!"

He knew it was impossible to protect both Fremy and the Braves.

Not letting anyone important to him die was what made Adlet the strongest man in the world. But sometimes, you had to make tough decisions. Someone who couldn't make those hard calls couldn't call himself the strongest in the world, either.

Tgurneu was leaving itself open now, and this would be Adlet's only chance to kill it. Tgurneu had weakened his love, and the boy had regained his sanity. If Tgurneu cranked up its ability to full force, he would be under its control again.

He had to kill Tgurneu. Right now.

"...!"

But his sword didn't move.

He tried banishing from his heart the desire to protect Fremy. He tried crushing the feelings on the verge of overcoming him. Again and again, he told himself it was a sham, just Tgurneu controlling him. But despite this knowledge, he still couldn't do the deed.

He saw Fremy's face in front of him. She'd saved him twice in the Phantasmal Barrier. And since they'd come to the Howling Vilelands, though she'd said nasty things to him, she'd also been concerned for him. When he had embraced her suddenly, she'd seemed so bashful, like a completely normal girl. And at the Temple of Fate, she'd asked him to save her.

All his various memories of her made him waver.

Just thinking about losing her was enough to nearly tear his heart to pieces, and knowing those feelings were a lie didn't ease the pain one bit. He was frustrated at himself for doing exactly what Tgurneu wanted. He wanted to kill himself that very minute for bringing it joy. But he still couldn't drive his blade home.

"That's a good expression, Adlet. Agonize more. Amuse me further." Tgurneu smiled and leaned in toward Adlet's face. "I know—I'll tell you something nice.

The truth is, there were plenty of other ways for me to kill the Braves of the Six Flowers. There was no need for me to adopt such roundabout methods simply to win. But I chose to create the Black Barrenbloom. I chose to raise up a seventh and control his love—all to see your face now.”

“...What?”

“It was all for this moment. I made the Black Barrenbloom so I could witness your reaction. That was why I gave you the seventh crest that I’d acquired and raised you.”

The boy’s expression changed. “You...raised me?” he stammered, sword still in hand.

As if to say *I’m glad you asked*, Tgurneu continued, “That’s right, I raised you—to lead you to the Howling Vilelands and make you betray the Braves. And...to see this very visage.”

Tgurneu went on: “First, I destroyed your village to ignite your hatred of fiends because, unfortunately, you didn’t have even a hint of desire to become a Brave of the Six Flowers. By destroying your village for you, I gave you a reason to become stronger.”

Adlet was struck speechless. *So it’s my fault my village was destroyed?*

“Then I used my human pawns to teach you about Atreau. Just as I expected, you became his apprentice for me.” Tgurneu leaned in close to Adlet’s face. “Yes, yes. I’ll tell you this, too: Atreau was another of my pawns.”

That’s a lie! Adlet wanted to yell. Atreau hated fiends and had spent his life researching them. He couldn’t have been Tgurneu’s ally.

“It doesn’t look like you believe me. But it’s true. Fifty years ago, I induced Atreau to hate fiends, and just as I’d calculated, Atreau then aspired to become a specialist in fiend eradication. Not unlike you.”

Adlet couldn’t reply.

“Atreau was a truly foolish man. Absolutely all his research was leaked to me. You’ve seen his records before, haven’t you? I know everything in the documents that summarize the results of his labors. I also knew that his best

weapon, the Saint's Spike, wouldn't work on me. If not for that, I wouldn't have allowed myself to take the hit from it when we first met."

If that's true, then there's no way I can defeat Tgurneu, is there? But Adlet rejected that idea. *I'm the strongest man in the world. Even if Tgurneu knows about all my secret tools, I'll win.*

"And it's even thanks to me that you became the strongest man in the world."

"Bullshit. I...accomplished that myself—"

"I know that when you first apprenticed to Atreau, you were hopelessly weak. But one day, you regained the ability to love. It was from that point on that you began getting stronger."

Adlet recalled what had happened four years ago, that dream of the girl, sitting in a corner of his memory for so long.

"That was when I implanted the love in you. Subsequently, you regained the desire to protect and became stronger. Do you understand? It was the power of love I implanted in you that gave you that strength. Without me, you would have been barely a mediocre warrior. I was the one who made you the strongest man in the world."

It was strange. Adlet felt as if his body was suddenly shrinking. Like every pillar in his life was turning out to be sand: the days upon days of hell he'd endured to get stronger, the secret tools he'd acquired, the pride at being the strongest man in the world that had kept him going. Like none of this would work against Tgurneu.

Because they were all gifts from Tgurneu itself.

"Let me tell you who you are. My pawn. My puppet. And..." Tgurneu stroked Adlet's cheek again. "My greatest toy. Do you think a toy can defeat its owner?"

Adlet was shaking so hard, his teeth chattered. Along with the hate, terror welled up in him—not of facing a strong foe but of seeing everything he'd believed in crumbling.

"No! I'm the strongest man in the world! I'm not your toy!" Adlet shouted.

Tgurneu laughed aloud. "I thought you would say that. And that you would

yell.” The fiend exposed itself to the tip of Adlet’s sword. “Come on, Adlet. Hate me more. Agonize on the threshold between love and hate—because I cultivated you to ensure you would show me that expression.”

He hated Tgurneu. But he couldn’t kill it. If he did, Fremy would die.

“It may be about time for the Braves to carry out your plan. Oh, this isn’t good. At this rate, they’ll find out where I am. I might lose my life.”

“...They...will. You’re...going to die here.”

“Before that happens, Adlet, could you tell me what that scheme is? If you don’t tell me, I’ll die. And will Fremy, too.”

“...Like hell I will!”

“Oh, you’ll tell me eventually—just as I arranged for you to.”

“Ngh!” Mora blocked the claws of the attacking fiend with her gauntlets, then broke its jaw with a kick and immediately grabbed the barrier stake to recharge it. She was maintaining the barrier, battling with fiends, and observing the area with her clairvoyance, and doing all three at once was deeply exhausting.

It had been ten minutes since she had received word that Hans had attacked Chamo, claimed he’d taken Fremy hostage, and then fled. He’d run toward the center of the ruins, which was outside of the range of Mora’s clairvoyance, so she had no idea what was going on. The others hadn’t come into range to tell her the situation, either.

She’d been informed they were nearly ready to carry out the plan—so then, they couldn’t afford to waste time. In the meanwhile, the fire-starting leaves could be found, their escape route could be blocked, and Goldof or Mora might fail in their defenses and fall.

Mora was impatient, but all she could do was keep defending herself from their enemies.

Goldof came into the barrier to slay a monkey-fiend. There were no other fiends inside now, and for the time being, Mora could rest. But there were still over three hundred more around them.

Then Goldof approached her, leaning in close. “Something...is strange.”

“...What is it?” The two spoke quietly so the fiends around wouldn’t hear.

“The fiends...don’t seem...worried at all. Besides...that monkey-fiend...I just...killed...had an...odd look...on its face.”

“...An odd look?”

“I can’t...read fiends’...expressions. But that ape-fiend...had a...humanlike face. Its expression...seemed triumphant...like this was...according to plan.”

Our strategy can’t have been leaked , thought Mora. It probably hadn’t. If it had, the fiends would have removed the gunpowder leaves or left the area. So their plan was still secure.

So then, why would a fiend have been acting that way?

“...They’re plotting something,” Mora muttered. Quite some time had passed since the Braves had come to these ruins. It was far too hopeful to believe that Tgurneu would just be doing nothing the whole time. This couldn’t mean their enemy had a means to kill them all and was trying to keep them in place until it had succeeded...could it?

“We should...order...a retreat,” said Goldof.

But they didn’t know what was going on with the others, so they couldn’t come to a decision. Besides, a fiendish expression was hardly solid evidence.

“...Let’s observe a little more carefully,” said Mora. “If they’re plotting something, then I’ll discover what.”

As she and Goldof discussed, fiends were still attacking the barrier, and one broke through. Mora hurriedly repaired their defense, while Goldof continued engaging the enemies that burst in.

“Thirty-sëven...möre mīnutes...”

Meanwhile, specialist number thirteen was muttering quietly to itself. Its voice was so quiet and indistinct that it was only audible as a sigh. Even if you were standing right beside it, you probably wouldn’t notice it was talking.

It wasn’t interested in Adlet’s suffering or Fremy’s fight. It wasn’t even considering what the Braves were doing. Number thirteen felt no drive to fight or kill. All it did was carry out Tgurneu’s orders, like a living, moving tool.

“...Thirty-six...möre mīnutes...,” it muttered again. No one was there to hear that time, either.

Dozzu and Rolonia were together at the northern side of the ruins, fighting with the wolf-fiend in charge of the fake command center.

“Tgurneuyoufleajustfuckingdie; rottingintothemudistilltoogoodforyou!”

The air was filled with Rolonia’s furious curses and the fiends’ shrieking. Her and Dozzu’s role was to keep an eye on the wolf-fiend and its unit until Adlet, Nashetania, and Fremy returned. There was no need for them to go on the offensive. They would launch a surprise attack and then run, attack again, then run—over and over.

Meanwhile, there was no sign the wolf-fiend was plotting anything. All it did was defend against them. Dozzu served as Rolonia’s backup as it observed. The light gem attached to the leopard-fiend was still there, so the strategy had yet to fall apart.

Even Dozzu was getting impatient now. They had been stuck in limbo for several minutes, ready to pull the trigger at any moment.

That was when they heard an explosion close by, to the southeast. Fremy had killed some fiends that were approaching Dozzu and Rolonia from behind, and Nashetania was coming up to Dozzu’s side.

Did you capture Hans? Dozzu wanted to know. But Nashetania mouthed some words, and Dozzu read her lips.

Keep fighting.

Fremy approached where Rolonia was flailing her whip, grabbed her by the nape of the neck, and dragged her away. When the fiends tried to seize the moment to attack, Nashetania defended herself and Rolonia, and all three immediately disappeared.

“Oh dear, but you only just came back! Where are you going?” The wolf-fiend was still faithfully pretending to be Tgurneu, an act that had long since worn thin. Dozzu didn’t bother responding, continuing the fight alone with the fiends of the fake command center.

It seemed the situation had deteriorated even further. Dozzu could tell as much from Fremy's and Nashetania's faces.

Fremy dragged Rolonia along with her toward the south. Not many enemies pursued them. Several times, they caught sight of Chamo's slave-fiends combating the fiends, so she was probably still searching for Hans and Adlet. The fiends were occupied with Chamo and seemingly had no time to bother with Fremy, Nashetania, and Rolonia.

"Calm down, Rolonia. Listen," Fremy said once they were hidden in a ruin. Rolonia had yet to cool her head.

Fremy and Nashetania told her about how Adlet had strayed away from them, that a white bird-fiend had informed them of Adlet's capture, and how Tgurneu's death would lead to Fremy's—and Fremy's to Adlet's.

Rolonia was shocked, unable to absorb the news. "I...don't understand. If you die, then Addy does, too...? So what did Tgurneu do?"

"It's a lot of unknowns for us, too, Rolonia. All we do understand is we have to heal Fremy's red mark," said Nashetania.

Seeing Rolonia's shock, Fremy was filled with self-reproach. It was all her fault. Fremy didn't even know why she was alive. Everything about her life was being exploited by Tgurneu. "I'm sorry, Rolonia. Because of me, Adlet..."

Suddenly, Rolonia slapped both her own cheeks. The befuddlement vanished from her face, and a strong will lit in her eyes. "There's nothing for you to apologize for, Fremy. I mean, Addy's alive, right?"

Fremy nodded. She pulled off her glove to show Rolonia the crest on her left hand. It still had all six petals.

"Even if Addy is captured, he wouldn't give away our plans. He'd find a way to slip away. And obviously, best case, he'll deceive Tgurneu or something. Don't worry about it. Focus on yourself, Fremy." Rolonia smiled. "He's the strongest man in the world."

She's strong, thought Fremy. Though she was always frightened, Rolonia was more steadfast and upright at her core than any of them. The utter opposite of Fremy. "Rolonia...I don't even know why I'm with the Braves—"

“Please show me your chest, Fremy. I’ll find a way to heal you, somehow. Though...I’m not that confident about it.”

“Please. I’ll be keeping watch, Rolonia,” Nashetania said, leaving the ruins.

Rolonia put her hand on Fremy’s chest. “I’ve never thought of you as a burden, Fremy.”

Then you’re wrong , Fremy thought.

“I mean, it’s because you’re with us that Addy can keep fighting. If you weren’t here, he would have become discouraged long ago and lost the will to fight. That’s why we need you. Absolutely.”

“I understand. I won’t waver over this again.” Fremy forced her lips into a pasted-on smile to encourage herself. Now that she tried it, this habit of Adlet’s wasn’t so bad.

“The plan hasn’t been leaked. We still have a chance to defeat Tgurneu,” Rolonia declared firmly.

Her face rose in his mind, his feelings for her tightening his chest, but he tried so hard to shake them all off. Adlet was fighting. From the outside, he would have appeared to be merely standing in silence, but he was embroiled in the cruelest and most hopeless battle of his entire life.

I want to make Fremy happy! He smothered the cry of his soul.

Have you forgotten that Fremy wants to kill Tgurneu, even if it costs her her life? Though she’d hesitated, she had rejected the fiends pressing her to surrender. *If you want to make her happy, you have to kill Tgurneu. That’s what she really wants.*

Adlet clenched his sword hard. The fiends surrounding him held their collective breath, but Tgurneu continued waiting, calm and motionless.

“Would my death really mean Fremy’s happiness?” Tgurneu asked, like it was reading Adlet’s mind. “I’ll tell you something nice. The dog Fremy cherished is doing well—as is her mother.”

Those words stopped Adlet’s sword flat.

Once again, Tgurneu cast the Book of Truth’s spell on itself. “[Fremy’s mother

really does love her. She still awaits Fremy's return, even now.]"

Adlet recalled what Fremy had told him in the Phantasmal Barrier, about the pain of betrayal she had suffered because of her mother and family. Back then, Adlet had sensed that, somewhere in her heart, Fremy wished to return to them.

"And not only her mother—plenty of other fiends await her return. I'd have liked to use the Book of Truth to show you this is true, but as I said before, it can be used only a limited number of times, and that was the last one." Tgurneu had undone the spell on itself, so Adlet didn't know if the latter part was true or not. But Fremy's mother really did love her.

Adlet's heart was faltering.

Tgurneu was lying; it was still fully capable of using the Book of Truth. But Tgurneu would have been in trouble if Adlet told it to cast the Book of Truth's spell on itself and say its intention was to make Fremy happy.

Of course, Tgurneu intended no such thing—it longed more than it could bear to see her face as she suffered in love. But it was still too early to be revealing those feelings.

"Will you destroy the potential for Fremy's happiness with your own hands when it's so close?" Tgurneu asked, and again, Adlet was frozen on the spot. "Tell me about your plan. If they go through with it now, Fremy and I will both die. She wouldn't hesitate to kill me, even if it meant her own life. But you don't need to worry. If you betray the Braves, she's going to be happy."

Fremy, happy. Adlet imagined that future: all the fiends apologizing to her for everything; her face, seized with anger and then softening; her reunion with her mother and the dog she loved; her peaceful life in a world with no humans, praised as a hero among fiends.

Adlet could imagine all these things vividly.

That was when Adlet began giving up on all of it. *The leopard-fiend*. The words very nearly slipped out.

"...Ngh!" He hit himself in the face. "Her happiness doesn't matter. She's not one of us. No...right now, she's my biggest enemy!" *Hate her*, he told himself. If

he was going to excise his feelings for her, there was no other way than to hate her.

She was a fiend. Even if she was half human, her other half was a filthy fiend. That alone was enough reason to hate her. There was no reason at all to protect a fiend girl.

Think. Find cause to hate her. Adlet closed his eyes and recalled the past. The scene of his home village in ruin—the villagers transformed into the Dead Host.

And Rainer, who had died before his eyes.

“...You destroyed my village to make me the seventh.”

“That’s right. For you. In order to control you. I destroyed it to make you hate fiends.”

And why did you control me? To make me protect Fremy. Without her, my village would never have been destroyed.

My home was wiped out because of her.

Desperately, Adlet nurtured the hatred inside him, attempting to regain his former determination to devote everything to revenge. “Rainer...,” he said.

Tgurneu’s expression went blank. “Rainer? ...Oh yes, he was your friend, wasn’t he? That poor boy joined the Dead Host, too,” it said. It wasn’t aware that, until the day before, Rainer had been alive.

In his heart, Adlet called out, *Rainer, Schetra, give me strength. Give me the hate I need to kill Fremy. Give me the strength to crush this false love.*

Hatred for Fremy welled within him. The fingers around his sword’s hilt strengthened, and he could feel himself slowly nurturing the strength to kill Tgurneu.

“But she didn’t know any of it,” said Tgurneu, and with that one line, even his desperate attempt at hatred vanished like mist.

Number eleven was grinding its teeth beside Tgurneu. When would Adlet reveal the Braves’ plan? How many minutes had they wasted on this? Number eleven didn’t have absolute confidence in its ability. Ultimately, it was just a supplementary skill, and there were any number of ways the Braves could break

through. They might well go through with their plan and find Tgurneu, or Chamo could end up discovering this place. There was still some cause for anxiety.

But if they got that information from Adlet promptly and left, the chances that Tgurneu would be discovered would vanish entirely.

Number eleven recalled the final request of the three-winged fiend. If Tgurneu ever lost its calm powers of judgment, number eleven would have to speak frankly to the commander.

There was nothing Tgurneu hated more than foolish opinions, and nothing frightened number eleven more than its wrath. But it screwed up its courage and spoke to Tgurneu in code. “<Cómmander Tgurneu...I bélieve this is enough entertainmént. Let us extract the ínformation from Adlet and go. It would be bëst to leave the élimination of the Braves of the Six Flowers to number thirteen.>”

Tgurneu looked number eleven in the face. In code, it ordered quietly, “<After the Braves have been killed, kill yourself. Your ability is useful, but your existence is a pestilence.>”

Number eleven couldn’t even reply. It didn’t understand what was mistaken about its honest advice. But Tgurneu’s orders were absolute.

“<You will not be permitted to resurrect. Make sure to destroy your core. Understand how deeply you have angered me.>”

Number eleven wondered if it had erred in its choice of who to serve. *No*, it told itself. Tgurneu had, in fact, driven the Braves to the wall. So it should kill itself as ordered.

Tgurneu instantly forgot its conversation with number eleven. Its mind was filled with only one thing: to keep watching Adlet’s face. Nothing else.

Tgurneu was struck with wonder at Adlet’s perseverance. He was struggling against the love Tgurneu had implanted in him, unable to make the decision to destroy the world. But one more push, and his heart would break. Tgurneu was waiting for that moment. He would sacrifice the whole world on the altar of his love, and now was the only moment Tgurneu could ever bear witness to such a

decision.

Rolonia quietly ran her hand across Fremy's exposed chest, then poked her with a needle and licked the blood that oozed out. Evaluating its taste, she studied the red mark afflicting her comrade.

Meanwhile, Fremy was thinking back on the past, wondering when Tgurneu had given her this red mark. She quickly realized, though, that wondering about it was pointless. If Tgurneu had wished to, it would have had any number of chances to do it.

"Did you figure anything out?" Fremy asked.

"...No more than what I discovered before. It's not a hieroform but a fiend's power. And I think...it's not like a parasite. If I have to say, it's more like a disease...but I can't pin down where its focus is." Scowling, Rolonia continued the examination.

Fremy searched her memory. Couldn't she remember anything? Didn't she know anything that could be of help to Rolonia? She recalled the family she'd spent so long with: her mother, White Lizard, Red Ant, Piercing Bird. Had they known about this red mark ailment? Of course they had. And they would obviously have been secretly snickering at her ignorance.

Had they never let slip any sort of information? Fremy recalled the days she'd spent with them.

Rolonia put her hand over Fremy's heart, near the center of her chest. The sensation summoned memories from the depths of her soul.

When Fremy had been small, her mother's hand always stroked her chest with the soft part of her antenna—the area over her heart. Peevish young Fremy had been averse to it, but her mother had always ignored her reaction and persisted with her caresses. Fremy had eventually come to accept the treatment.

"...My heart," Fremy said. "Rolonia, examine my heart carefully."

Rolonia nodded. Cautiously, she inserted her needle near Fremy's heart. She licked the blood from the needle before stabbing again, then licked and stabbed over and over. Fremy stopped breathing, waiting for Rolonia to finish examining

her.

“Oh...,” Rolonia said. “It’s there. There’s something like a tumor in your heart. It’s small, so you’d probably never even notice it normally, and it would be harmless to you. But a tentacle’s coming out of it that’s hurting your heart and lungs. And...it’s also excreting a poison to destroy your core.”

“So if you remove that...”

“Then you’d be all right. I can’t find anything else unusual in your body. So if we can just remove this tumor, you won’t need to worry about a thing.”

Fremy asked the important question: “Can you take it out right here, right now?”

Rolonia fell silent.

Fremy said, “No, that was a stupid thing to ask. Just try it.”

Rolonia nodded and focused her will, and her hand on Fremy’s chest glowed. Instantly, blood began gushing from Fremy’s mouth.

“A-ah! Ahhh!” Rolonia panicked and frantically held a hand over Fremy’s mouth as she lay on the ground, using a different technique on her chest.

Spewing blood, Fremy stood up. *This won’t work after all*, she thought. She had to figure out some other method. She had to find something, or they couldn’t save Adlet.

Adlet wasn’t even sure when he had fallen to his knees before Tgurneu.

He couldn’t overcome his desire to make Fremy happy. He couldn’t hate her. A moment’s lapse of concentration, and the words would spill from his lips. A fire. The leopard-fiend. The plan.

“I’m...the...strongest man in the world,” Adlet said. This mantra was the last thing he could rely on. The strongest man in the world would not lose. The strongest man in the world could withstand any trial.

No matter how painful it would be to lose Fremy, the strongest man in the world was sure to endure it. He would be able to destroy the fake love that had been implanted within him.

Believe it. I'm the strongest man in the world. I'm not Tgurneu's puppet. I'm not Tgurneu's toy.

Fremy coughed. She felt like she would pass out from the pain and feeling of suffocation, but she fought it back and asked Rolonia to use her skills one more time.

Then Nashetania burst into the ruined building. "...Let's go. The fiends have discovered us." Fremy ran out of the ruin with Rolonia supporting her. Nashetania seemed to infer the results from their expressions.

As they shook off the sparse few fiends that pursued them, Nashetania suggested, "It may be best to consider running away. Quite some time has passed since Adlet was first captured. While I don't want to think about it, it's been long enough for Tgurneu to have tortured him and gotten him to spill everything. Our plan has most likely already been discovered."

As Fremy spat out the blood that had pooled in her mouth, she replied, "No, it hasn't."

"What makes you say that?"

"Tgurneu will have figured out that we're cooking up something, but it doesn't know what yet."

"Why not?"

"If Tgurneu knew what we'd concocted, it would take advantage of that to come up with a scheme to kill us. It would actually be more convenient for Tgurneu if we pulled the trigger. But Tgurneu is trying to slow us down. It's afraid we'll do it."

Nashetania nodded.

"This may be hopeful speculation, but we should still have an opportunity to kill Tgurneu."

"I think Addy's fighting to keep its a secret," said Rolonia.

"But we can't figure out the most important thing, which is how to cure you, Fremy," said Nashetania. "Worst-case scenario, we'll be forced to make a decision. You and Adlet might not survive."

Rolonia was shaken, but from Nashetania's perspective, this conclusion was obvious.

"It would be a troubling decision for us, too. But if Tgurneu kills us, we'll lose everything."

Rolonia seemed like she wanted to argue, but Fremy restrained her with a hand. "Rolonia, if you remove the tumor in my heart, the problem goes away, right?"

"Yes, I'm certain of that much. But...I can't do it. I think it's eating into your heart. If I take it out, your heart will stop. No matter how strong you are...it's no use. You'd never survive that way. Well, if Torleau were here, then maybe..." Rolonia held her head, moaning.

Then an idea hit Fremy. "Nashetania, stick with us just a bit longer. If this fails, then I'll give up."

"...All right."

"This is going to be a gamble."

Meanwhile, the wolf-fiend was desperately continuing its act. A little while ago, number twenty-four had stopped talking, and there was no more contact from Tgurneu. It had told the wolf-fiend about Adlet and Hans's capture and then nothing more.

Not knowing what to do, the wolf-fiend had simply ordered its subordinates to keep going as is—slow down any Braves skulking nearby and kill Mora and Goldof, who were holed up inside their barrier.

All the wolf-fiend had been doing for some time now was fending off Dozzu's tenacious attacks while informing Tgurneu of the Braves' movements. The wolf-fiend's subordinates were looking at it with skeptical eyes.

"<Healing fiend, don't let your guard down. Prepare yourself for immediate action,>" the wolf-fiend said to specialist number seventeen at its side. It had told its subordinate fiends to observe Fremy from a distance. If something unexpected was to happen to her, number seventeen would rush in to heal her immediately. Number seventeen's ability could even bring back a fiend from the brink of death.

They could not allow Fremy to die. That was an absolute order from Tgurneu.

That was when a messenger rushed toward the wolf-fiend. When the wolf-fiend heard its message, it doubted its ears.

“<Fremy is fighting with Rolonia and Nashetania. She’s betrayed the Braves!>”

“Please, come to your senses!” Rolonia yelled as she blocked Fremy’s bullets with her whip.

“I misjudged you, Fremy! Don’t you understand that you’re being deceived?!” Nashetania’s blades stabbed toward Fremy from the ground, and the Saint of Gunpowder just barely dodged them. Their acting was good, in her opinion. To the fiends, the fight must have seemed real.

They could hear dozens of fiends approaching them from the front. Farther into the forest, Fremy spotted the wolf-fiend.

“Tgurneu! I surrender! Don’t attack me!” Fremy leaped into the fiends’ midst. The lower ranks attacked Rolonia and Nashetania while Fremy laid her gun on the ground and knelt before the wolf-fiend. “...I was wrong. I once wanted to kill you, but no more. I realized the only place for me is among fiends, after all.” Fremy knew the wolf-fiend wasn’t Tgurneu, but she chose to pretend to believe the ruse.

“I see, but you do often lie. You aren’t plotting something, are you?”

“It’s no wonder you would suspect me. But all I can do is insist that I’m being honest.” As Fremy spoke with the wolf-fiend, she scanned its unit out of the corner of her eye—and discovered the one she was looking for. A caterpillar-shaped creature: specialist number seventeen.

The one with a restorative ability that could heal the wounds of any fiend.

“A healing fiend...,” Rolonia had muttered with skepticism upon hearing Fremy’s suggestion just a few minutes earlier.

Fremy was uneasy, too. There was no way to cure the red mark except to remove the tumor from her heart, but even Fremy would die if her heart was gouged out.

Then she remembered one of the fiends in Tgurneu’s forces—in the wolf-

fiend's unit. It was a healer of some renown within Tgurneu's faction. That fiend, specialist number seventeen, could repair bodies—even restore a lost limb or bring a fiend back from the brink of death. Fremy's mother had told her it was even capable of healing Fremy, though her body was much different from a regular fiend's.

“Gouge out my heart and have that healing-fiend restore it. Do that, and we might be able to heal this.”

“...I can't! Making the enemy heal you...” Rolonia trailed off.

“I'll pretend to betray you. They were trying to make me surrender before, so if they believe I'm their ally, they'll heal me.”

“We have no guarantee of that,” said Nashetania. “They might well abandon you following your betrayal. And neither can we be sure that healing your heart will eliminate that red mark.”

“But this is the only way,” Fremy shot back. It seemed they agreed on that much.

“They're not going to see me killing myself right in front of them. I'll pretend to betray you two and assault you. During the fight, I'll give you an opportunity—attack my heart then.” Fremy looked at Rolonia's face. She had to leave this to the one with a precise understanding of where the tumor was located. Fremy gazed into her eyes.

Though Rolonia seemed hesitant, she nodded. “But will the enemy really believe you actually betrayed us?”

“I'll convince them,” said Fremy. “Once the red mark is healed, we'll carry out the plan immediately. If it fails and I die, then go through with it anyway.” She handed Rolonia a tiny firecracker. Setting it off would ignite the dry leaves and envelop the forest in flame, along with the gunpowder on the last two aerial fiends in their way. Then, once they killed number twenty-four, that should cut off all avenues of contact between Tgurneu and the wolf-fiend but the one.

They would leave killing number twenty-four to Nashetania. Now, even without Fremy, they could still go through with the plan. Once they were ready, Fremy pointed her gun at Rolonia and fired, making sure the bullet would just

skim her ear.

The healing fiend—number seventeen—was monitoring Fremy closely. It seemed to suspect her, just like the rest of the wolf's unit.

They couldn't try to get number seventeen to heal her heart yet. Fremy had to assure them that she had really betrayed the Braves, or the fiends might leave her to die. So what should she do to make them believe her? She looked over at Rolonia and Nashetania, embroiled in battle with the fiends. She would just have to show them a fight between her and the others.

But the moment she made her decision and stood, the wolf-fiend grabbed her arm with a tentacle. "There's no need for you to fight. Instead, tell me: Why didn't you come to me immediately when we called for your surrender?" it asked. She would have to give it a good reply, or they would recognize her betrayal as an act.

"...I was confused. I thought maybe you were trying to deceive me again."

"I don't follow your thinking. Are we sure you're not the one trying to deceive me? There's something strange about this, Fremy."

To avoid revealing the agitation in her voice, Fremy carefully searched for an answer.

"Could you tell me what brought you to this decision? Did something happen with Rolonia and Nashetania?"

Fremy closed her mouth. She searched for an answer that would convince the wolf-fiend and Tgurneu behind it. She had to find it, or Adlet would be lost.

Meanwhile, Adlet was gripping his sword and getting to his feet. He'd resolved to kill Tgurneu. Just imagining the pain of losing Fremy gave him goosebumps. But the strongest man in the world had to withstand it. *I can take this*, Adlet told himself. The very thought made him feel like he would die. He would rather die. But he raised his sword anyway.

"...Oh-ho." Tgurneu watched Adlet with disbelief. "I'm quite impressed you would resist so. You would even abandon your love to kill me?"

"...Because I'm the strongest man in the world."

The ten fiends surrounding the pair were ready to jump on Adlet to hold him back. But Tgurneu indicated with a hand that they were not to attack. Adlet was furious. *Just how much contempt does it have for me?*

Just then, a four-armed great ape-fiend yelled something in code. Adlet remembered it as the one that would occasionally whisper things to Tgurneu. It had to be the communication fiend, specialist number twenty-four.

“Hmm,” said Tgurneu. “It seems an important message has arrived. Perfect timing.”

The wolf-fiend pressed Fremy. Why surrender now? Did she think nothing of the allies with whom she’d fought so far?

“I realized that, ultimately, they’re humans. They’re not on my side. And once they’re done with me, I know they’ll kill me,” Fremy lied through her teeth.

“Is that so? Then I’m going to kill them all. You don’t mind, do you?”

“I don’t.”

“...That’s suspicious. I didn’t think you were capable of such coldheartedness.”

Fremy scowled. Even that wasn’t enough to convince it? But she couldn’t think of anything else to say to make it believe her. “...But...” Fremy spoke hesitantly.

“But what?”

“Don’t kill Adlet. Being with him made me want to live, just a little. He makes me angry, but I don’t want to let him die.” A thoughtlessly sincere request slipped from her lips. Before she had even realized it, Adlet had become irreplaceable to her.

Once it was out of her mouth, she regretted saying it. This might have the opposite effect. If the wolf-fiend thought she still had lingering attachments to keeping the Braves safe, that would strengthen its suspicions.

But unexpectedly, the wolf-fiend replied, “I see . Finally, I understand how you truly feel. Was it for Adlet’s sake? It seems your betrayal of the Braves is legitimate. Fine. I’ll let Adlet alone live.”

Fremy hid her joy as best she could. She had managed to deceive the wolf-

fiend. Now, perhaps, Adlet would be saved.

“Fremy has betrayed the Braves. She’s surrendered to us.”

“Wh...?” Adlet was shocked. His sword, ready to thrust forward, came to a halt. Hesitation blossomed again in his heart. Once more, he could picture Fremy and her happy life among the fiends.

“So...what?” he muttered, couching his sword again. Hadn’t he been determined to kill Tgurneu, even if it meant sacrificing his beloved?

“Fremy said you were the only one she wants spared.”

“...Huh?” When Adlet heard that, his sword slipped from his hands. He listened to Tgurneu repeat what Fremy had said. Tgurneu told him every word, verbatim, no omissions, and Adlet understood—she really had said that.

He couldn’t believe it. He’d believed Fremy disliked him. Before, she had clearly said as much. While they had been chasing Hans, right before they had parted ways, she had been angry with him. “What...? She still...didn’t hate me?” Adlet’s heart filled with joy. What could be more gladdening than discovering someone you care about returns your feelings?

For a moment, he even forgot he was under the influence of a false love.

“Ha...ha-ha...” He laughed weakly.

As Adlet’s heart swelled with delight, his determination to resist the pain of her loss vanished from his heart—as did his pride in the belief that he was the strongest man in the world. His resolution to save the world, his desire to resist being Tgurneu’s toy all evaporated.

“Ha...ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Adlet burst into peals of hollow laughter.

He no longer had the willpower to withstand this love. He wanted Fremy to live. He wanted her to be happy. Even if the world came to an end, that didn’t matter to him, as long as she was safe. He understood the feelings were a false love implanted by Tgurneu, but even knowing that, he still loved her.

Rainer’s face, his sister’s, and those of the villagers floated through his head. Atreau and the other apprentices he’d met on that mountain, the many people he’d met since leaving Atreau’s mountain, and his allies, the Braves—all their

faces rose in his mind, then disappeared.

Only one remained: hers.

In his mind, Adlet vowed *I'm going to destroy the world now for a single woman. For a false love that was implanted in me. For a woman I don't actually love.*

It all seemed so ridiculous to him, he couldn't stop laughing.

That was when Adlet saw Tgurneu suddenly move a little to the side, and one of the fiends beside it moved to stand directly in front of Adlet. It was a fiend with a human body and the face of a bird. It was looking closely at him.

"...It's the leopard-fiend. The leopard-fiend in that fake commander wolf-fiend's unit," Adlet said weakly. "We figured it would lead us to you. They plan to follow it when it's sent to you as a messenger."

Adlet told Tgurneu everything—about the fire they'd set up in the forest, the light gem they'd stuck to the leopard-fiend, and even their escape route in case the plot failed and their signals for starting the plan and for retreat. He spilled it all.

Now the Braves would never be able to find Tgurneu. Escape or survival would be impossible. Tgurneu just listened to Adlet without a word.

"You finally got it out of him..." Adlet heard the goat-fiend beside Tgurneu mutter.

"Now that's everything, Tgurneu. I've told you everything," Adlet said, and the laughter welled up from the pit of his stomach again. The loud cackling poured out for some time after that, and when it finally died down, he covered his face and screamed so hard that his throat bled. He screamed, wailed, and flailed in agony, and then, finally, began to bawl.

The sight of him brought Tgurneu to bellowing hysterics, holding its stomach, face turned skyward as it writhed in mirth. "Thank you, Adlet. I'm grateful for the miracle of our meeting. You've been the very best toy."

The moment Adlet heard that, he stopped crying. He looked at the ground, devoid of laughter or tears.

There was no expression on his face at all.

Chapter 5
Resistance



Chapter 5

Resistance

“Eight...möre minütes...” Specialist number thirteen didn’t know anything—not what was happening to the Braves or what Tgurneu was doing. It had no interest and didn’t think about it.

“Sëven...möre minütes...” Would its own attack succeed? Would all the Braves die in the end? Number thirteen wasn’t even considering it. It would do what it had been told, precisely as Tgurneu had ordered. It was a tool for that purpose.

“...Six minütes,” it muttered quietly underground.

It was so satisfying. Adlet’s face left Tgurneu perfectly content.

It was an expression that could only ever be seen once in all of history: the face of the boy who would destroy the world in order to protect one girl. And what’s more, he had done it knowing his love for her was a lie. But even so, he’d been unable to rid himself of his emotions. Tgurneu had supped its fill of that love-born suffering.

Tgurneu would have liked to go somewhere calm and sip tea while basking in the afterglow, but unfortunately, that wasn’t possible. The Braves of the Six Flowers were still alive. Through number twenty-four, Tgurneu instructed the wolf-fiend not to allow the leopard messenger to ever come near Tgurneu.

Tgurneu also used Adlet’s information about the Braves’ route of retreat to instruct its fiends to lie in wait and prevent their escape. Now not only would the Braves fail to defeat Tgurneu, they would also be unable to flee.

Tgurneu was impressed, though. It had believed nothing could have enabled the Braves to discover it. It hadn’t even considered they would turn their attention toward the leopard. Their bit with the fire had also been unexpected. It had believed it impossible to ignite the whole of the woods with Atreau’s chemical.

Had they been able to carry out their plan, the foolish wolf-fiend would have dispatched the leopard-fiend, just as they’d expected. And since they’d have

been approaching Tgurneu with a clear goal, number eleven's powers would have been unable to keep Tgurneu hidden. Tgurneu had just barely escaped death.

Tgurneu complimented Adlet's valiant fight. "You were close. So very close, Adlet." Tgurneu began addressing the boy on the ground in front of him.

Adlet was silent on his knees before Tgurneu. He'd already stopped crying. His eyes were open, but there was nothing in them. His spirit was now completely shattered. The sight of him made laughter bubble up once more from Tgurneu's belly.

"...You there. Imprison Adlet in your stomach," Tgurneu ordered the hippo-fiend standing to its side. They couldn't kill him yet. He still had an important role to play. "You must not injure him, and absolutely do not let him escape. Also, keep his ears plugged so he's unaware of what's going on outside. You got that?"

The hippo-fiend opened its large mouth, and a tentacle slithered out from within to grab Adlet's body, dragging him into the fiend's stomach. Adlet didn't resist, not even slightly.

"Relax and rest, Adlet. I'll make Fremy happy."

Adlet didn't even react.

Tgurneu left the hippo-fiend. "Now then, I do feel satisfied, but...there's still more fun to be had," it muttered. It had enjoyed Adlet's torment, but there was still Fremy. This battle wasn't over until Tgurneu had seen her love-born suffering.

Tgurneu hadn't relinquished its control of Adlet's love. It had decided it would do that before Fremy's eyes. *I will show you, Fremy, that Adlet never actually loved you. I'll show you that it was all just a part of my plan.*

What sort of face would she make?

"I don't believe it! It's a lie. You must be lying!" Tgurneu imagined she would yell. It tried saying the words aloud. It couldn't resist a little smile. It was so looking forward to the moment Fremy accepted reality. She was sure to kill herself. She would despair of it all and end her own life. Tgurneu was

unbearably excited for it.

“...That’s it!” Tgurneu was hit with a flash of inspiration. It would be nice watching her face as she killed herself, but there was another look that would be more appealing.

Tgurneu would make Adlet kill her.

When Fremy attempted to kill herself, Tgurneu would revive her using the healing fiend’s powers, and then Tgurneu would tell Adlet, *If you kill Fremy with your own hands, I’ll give you one more chance to fight me.*

Once Tgurneu had canceled Adlet’s love for Fremy, he would no longer hesitate to kill her. He would loathe her from the bottom of his heart for being the cause of the world’s destruction. The very man whose love she’d believed in would single-mindedly thirst for her blood. What expression would she make then?

“All right, I’ve made up my mind. I’ll be sure to have Adlet kill Fremy,” Tgurneu murmured. There was no time for rest now. The next joy awaited.

Number thirteen would soon be ready. The Braves of the Six Flowers would all die, as would Nashetania. Dozzu and Cargikk would surrender to Tgurneu, and all obstructions would be gone. Now Tgurneu just had to wait for all the Six Braves to die.

“...Heh-heh.” Tgurneu chuckled in its throat. The Braves, believing their plan had yet to be exposed, were lingering in these ruins. They trusted Adlet, unaware that he was the traitor and that it was all already over. Tgurneu would enjoy seeing their struggle as a prelude to Fremy’s despair.

“Now then...wolf-fiend. What are the Braves doing?” Tgurneu addressed the wolf-fiend through number twenty-four. The fiend commander was already certain of its victory. The rest was just cleanup.

Unable to hear or see anything, Adlet lay weakly in the fiend’s stomach. The air was thick and humid, and it was hard to breathe. But he didn’t care about that anymore.

“Let me...die...,” Adlet moaned. “I’ll do anything, please. I beg you, let me die.” His pleas would reach no one. Not even the fiend that had swallowed him.

The hippo-fiend had him bound inside its stomach with a tentacle that grew from its mouth. All his limbs were constricted, right up to his neck, and the tips of tentacles were shoved into both his ears. His eardrums ached. He didn't resist.

"...Let me die."

It wasn't just the betrayal of his allies that he regretted—he regretted the whole fight this far, his life, everything.

What had he been fighting for? What if he'd been unable to protect Fremy in the temple and had let her die? What if he'd been killed in the Phantasmal Barrier? None of this would have happened. They would have been able to foil Tgurneu's plans.

All this desperate survival and struggle had been in service of Tgurneu's motives.

What if he hadn't apprenticed to Atreau? What if he'd given up on revenge and sought out a normal, happy life? Then what?

Tgurneu had said Fremy would have died without him, and that was completely right. Who would have managed to protect her in the Temple of Fate but him? If he had given up on his revenge, someone else would have been chosen as the seventh. That person would surely have failed to protect her and let her die. And if that had happened, the Braves would have won. If he'd just never existed, the world would have been saved.

Who the hell was he? He wasn't the strongest man in the world. He wasn't a Brave of the Six Flowers who would save the world. He wasn't a hero who got revenge for his loved ones, either, or the one person who could make Fremy happy.

Who was Adlet Mayer? The answer was already clear.

Tgurneu's puppet. Tgurneu's toy.

Hans had been unable to stop the hippo-fiend from swallowing Adlet. The corner of the square where Tgurneu and its guard stood was walled off by the spider-fiend's thread. The viscous silk wouldn't be cut by Hans's sword. He was powerless.

But even if the thread wall hadn't been there, Hans probably wouldn't have been able to save Adlet since forty of the fiends under Tgurneu's command were now attacking him.

"Göt you!" Four swiped out with their claws from all four sides. Ducking so low that his torso skimmed the ground, Hans jumped forward and slipped between the legs of one to escape the trap. He tried striking the fiend from below while he was at it, but no sooner was he underneath than another attacked him. With the strength of his arms alone, Hans switched his trajectory and just barely avoided its claws.

But he didn't even have a single moment to rest. Once he'd evaded that, another fiend was waiting for him.

He'd never faced enemies like this before. On an individual basis, they were all stronger than the ones he'd fought before coming to the ruins. What was really exceptional, though, was their sense of coordination.

Hans constantly kept moving, trying to create a one-on-one situation, but after well over half an hour of combat, he hadn't managed it, not even once. It was as if they were reading one another's minds as they fought.

Exhaustion was slowing him down. He couldn't quite block their attacks anymore, and he was so covered in blood that he didn't have a clean patch of skin on him. He'd still cut down ten of the forty fiends, but his stamina was already gone. He couldn't relax for so much as a second, and this had been going on for too long. This task of searching for the slightest escape route and surviving each moment trapped in the silk cocoon was beyond even what Hans could take.

"Sorry for the wait, Hans." Tgurneu left the hippo-fiend to turn his attention to the Brave. The spider-fiend sucked up its silk, removing the wall that separated them, and Hans's opponents stopped fighting to surround him at a distance and watch.

"You were so quiet. You don't think that was cold? I think you should have encouraged him to overcome the power of love and kill me."

Hans didn't reply. He knew it was pointless. Adlet had put up a fight, but that was just part of Tgurneu's game. Hans had expected Adlet to give in and leak

the plan.

But when Adlet had lifted his head to the sky and wailed, Hans had uncharacteristically felt for him. Even now that they were enemies, Hans had never hated Adlet.

Hans was more of a villainous type but not the sort who got pleasure out of torturing his enemies. In his line of work, he saw people like that quite often, but it only ever disgusted him.

“You were truly foolish,” said Tgurneu. “Had just been done with it and killed Adlet, you would still have had a chance at winning. It was all that stupid scheming that made things turn out like this. Now Adlet’s in my hands, and you’re all alone. Hey, how do you feel right now?”

Hans wanted to bluff and say *Neowt so bad* , but he was so tired, the words wouldn’t even come out of his mouth.

“The world will be destroyed because of you. Your foolish decisions have brought it all to an end. Your family, your closest friends, the woman you love—everyone is going to die, because of you. So come on, tell me: What do you feel now?”

Hans got the feeling then that he was starting to understand Tgurneu, just a little bit. The fiend was obsessed with love. It found pleasure in making those who felt it suffer. Not like the knowledge was worth anything, though.

“You’re real meowin’ crazy.”

“I get that a lot. I’m sick of hearing it,” Tgurneu said with a smile.



“...There’s neow one in my life close enough to call a real friend. I’ve fergotten all my family’s faces, too. I’ve slept with plenty of women, whenever I’m in the mood, but I’ve neowver fallen in love. Sorry, Tgurneu, but my face ain’t gonna be much fun fer ya,” Hans said, smiling back.

“...You really are quite boring. Die already. Once I’ve killed you, I’ll go somewhere safe to await the death of the Braves,” Tgurneu said, and the fiends resumed their attack on Hans.

Hans had gotten enough of a break to catch his breath, but now the fiends assaulted him with even more ferocity. Bounding around, ahead, then back, Hans avoided being encircled. Unfortunately, he couldn’t afford to die yet. There was still a chance of beating Tgurneu.

Chamo would still be searching for him. She would have unleashed dozens of her slave-fiends over the whole ruins area. At least one would have to come near the square. And if she found him, the situation would turn around immediately.

It didn’t have to be Chamo, either. There were Fremy and Nashetania, too. Dozzu and Rolonia could be out there. So Hans couldn’t die until they found him. He had to survive and keep Tgurneu here.

“Unfortunately, Hans, your wish will not come true. Help is not coming.”

Meanwhile, Chamo was dashing through the southern area of the ruins, still searching for Hans as she fought off the fiends descending on her from all directions. The fiends’ sporadic attacks wouldn’t slow her down.

“Wh-why? Why can’t Chamo find them?” But she couldn’t find any clues. She couldn’t find Hans. “Damn it! At this rate, Chamo won’t be able to kill him,” she muttered as she continued her search.

Mora was still with Goldof, contending with the fiends that surrounded her barrier. She was nearing the limits of her stamina, and Goldof couldn’t hide signs of exhaustion, either. At first, they’d figured they just had to hold out until the others could execute the plan. They hadn’t anticipated this skirmish would drag on for so long.

“Did you...find...anything, Mora?” Goldof asked after slaying an enemy. Under

his protection, Mora was focusing on combing the area with her clairvoyance.

Mora's suspicion that Tgurneu was plotting something that would kill her and Goldof—or even all six Braves—had become a certainty. But none of the three hundred fiends she observed around them seemed to be preparing anything.

There were just too few clues. Even so, Mora kept her clairvoyant eye vigilant.

“Please, Fremy! Open your eyes!” Rolonia's whip danced. Fremy dodged it with a roll to the side, taking on the advancing Braves alongside the fiends of the fake command center.

The wolf-fiend was smirking in the rear, behind Fremy's protection. It seemed convinced of her betrayal. Most likely, Tgurneu, listening in on things from afar, believed as much, too.

“Please give it up already! Fremy's our enemy now! We must kill her!” Nashetania yelled.

Rolonia shook her head. “I can't! I couldn't kill her!” The two maintained their charade to hide their intentions. Thanks to them, the enemies believed in Fremy's betrayal.

“Ngh!” Fremy deliberately let Nashetania's blade slice her, and blood spurted from her side. The fiends immediately hurried in front of her to drive back Nashetania. Then the healing fiend panicked and rushed to Fremy's side to heal her wound.

Its healing powers were as incredible as ever. It took not even a few seconds for her wound to disappear. Fremy was certain—this would work. Even if her heart was carved out, the fiend would heal her right away. She could survive. She didn't know if the healing fiend's power could cure the red mark, but still, she had no choice.

Fremy thought, *Adlet, wait just a little longer. We'll execute the plan and come save you.*

Hans believed Tgurneu's confidence was no act. Everything it said was probably true, and help would not come. Its plan to kill all the Braves of the Six Flowers would likely soon be complete.

“*Meearrow!*” But Hans blocked an attack with his sword. Crawling like a cat, he wove around the fiends’ legs.

“...You’re stubborn, Hans,” commented Tgurneu.

Hans had never really wished for a long life, but he wasn’t exactly enthusiastic about dying right now. He recalled a certain idiot who’d said *As long as you’re alive, we’re sure to find a way out of this*, or something similar.

“This ain’t meowch like me to say, but...”

“What?”

“We ain’t that easy,” Hans declared with a swipe at a fiend.

Then it happened. Hans suddenly smelled something strange. Something was rising from the earth, and it didn’t take long for him to realize it was poison.

Immediately, he jumped away, defending himself from the fiends within the narrow confines of the silk cocoon as he moved. But even over here, the same strange smell wafted around him.

“No? I doubt that.”

“Öne...möre minute.”

Meanwhile, specialist number thirteen was hidden underground, in the deepest part of a waterway used by the humans of this land in ancient times.

Number thirteen’s power was to generate a vast quantity of very small units from itself. These units, smaller than insects, had already spread through the water veins and waterways under the ruins.

The units had two abilities: The first was to produce poison that affected the nerves, paralyzing the body until ultimately stopping its victim’s heart and ending their life. The poison had no effect on fiends. The water underground was already teeming with so much poison that a drop into a human’s mouth would kill them instantly.

The other power these units had was to heat up water. The moment number thirteen gave the order, the units would emit heat—enough to boil the subterranean pools. It would turn into steam and waft aboveground.

The place where the Braves squared off against the fiends would instantly be transformed into hell.

“...Zëro.”

Number thirteen ordered the units filling the passages to bring the water to a boil.

Meanwhile, Fremy also smelled something strange. Rolonia, Nashetania, and Dozzu all went pale, too.

“Poison... It’s poison!” Rolonia yelled. Behind Fremy, the wolf-fiend roared in victory.

Tgurneu had not simply been waiting. It had been arranging to kill them all.

The moment after Fremy realized they had lost, something strange happened. The whole of the ruins shook with a great rumble. The earth moaned. *Is this part of Tgurneu’s plan, too?* Fremy wondered.

But the wolf-fiend was also looking down in confusion. Fremy turned her head toward the soaring mountains. *It couldn’t be*, she thought.

Mora’s hair stood on end as a steam-like mist rose from her gauntlets. Her eyes flashed like fire.

She had poured all her power as a Saint, honed over many years, into the single focus of her fist.

She had used her power of clairvoyance to search and search all over the mountain but hadn’t found anything aboveground. There was nothing unusual in the sky, either. So then, it had to be underground.

In the waterways, Mora found the cadaver of a mouse. Fish corpses floated in the water veins. That was when Mora finally realized what the enemy was going to do—unleash poison from underground.

With her clairvoyance, Mora dove into the water and found just one surviving water snake clinging to the deepest pit of the water vein, spouting bubbles from its mouth. There was a very small protrusion on its forehead.

Anyone who found it would be helpless to stop it—except Mora.

“This will consume all my power, Goldof. I entrust the rest to you!” Mora cried, slamming her gauntlet into the ground. That one strike made the mountains rattle. She was the Saint of Mountains, the master of the stone.

The water snake-fiend’s underground hiding place rocked. The ceiling crumbled, and boulders fell into the water. The water snake fled, but the whole network collapsed: rocks, earth, everything. It all sank to the depths to flatten the water snake-fiend. With no means of escape, number thirteen was helplessly crushed.

The heated water failed to boil and quietly cooled.

Nevertheless, some of the poison vapor still puffed up toward the surface through wells, waterways, and the slightest cracks in the earth’s surface.

Having exhausted her strength, every muscle in Mora’s body went limp. Unable to support herself, she fell to the ground. The gauntlets normally looked so light on her hands, but she could now hardly lift them.

Still, she couldn’t afford to pass out yet. Mora clung to consciousness, even as it felt like she would fall into darkness. She used her power of mountain echo to shout to the heavens: **“Everyone! Flee from this place! Poison spews up from underground! I managed to stop it, but we must not linger!”**

Her mountain echo spread through the whole ruins, where the battle continued.

“Meow-hee , it’s just like she said, huh?”

Mora’s mountain echo had reached Hans and Tgurneu’s battle. The stench rising from the ground made Hans cough reflexively. But the foul scent grew no stronger, and Hans could still move. Had the poison succeeded, the Braves would all mostly likely have died.

“Hmph. Mora is better than I thought.” Tgurneu seemed somewhat embarrassed.

But Hans could tell the poison was definitely working. Slowly, his body was being paralyzed.

“This is very much like her, though, I must say. If she’d only been a bit faster,

she may have been able to avert the Braves' deaths. Foolish, right where it counts."

"Naw. She bought me the time to kill ya, at least." Hans kept running, darting through the spaces between the dozen or so fiends surrounding him. The situation hadn't changed one bit. His struggle to survive continued.

Mora's mountain echo reached Fremy's ears, too. *That was close*, she thought with sincere gratitude toward Mora. That had been an amazing feat, considering she'd been encircled by enemies and in mortal danger.

"...The Braves are so stubborn. And I wanted to put them out of their misery quickly," Fremy said to the wolf-fiend. She was betraying the Braves right now, so she couldn't appear pleased that they'd been saved.

"Relax, Fremy. This poison has no effect on fiends. And we've already made sure it doesn't work on you, either," the wolf-fiend confided.

"Then Dozzu will be a problem. Leave that one to me," Fremy said, firing at Dozzu—making sure the fiends wouldn't be able to tell she was shifting her aim off slightly.

"I misjudged you, Fremy! We fought with you as allies! Just what do you take us for?!" Dozzu cried, while also sending her a flicker of an eye signal. It, too, realized she wasn't attacking seriously. There had been no time to explain the situation, but it seemed to understand Fremy had pretended to surrender for some purpose.

"Please don't worry! It will take a while for the poison to circulate fully through our bodies! We still have enough time to stop Fremy and save Addy!" Rolonia glanced at Fremy with a look that said *It's okay*. They wouldn't waste the time Mora had bought for them. They were going to save Adlet.

Fremy fired at Rolonia, and her bullet skimmed Rolonia's pauldron. Fremy deliberately gave Rolonia an opening as she loaded a second shot.

With a look of resolve, Rolonia's whip snapped, aiming for Fremy's heart. Fremy pretended not to notice and closed her eyes.

The tip of Rolonia's sharp, pointed whip pierced Fremy's chest and writhed around inside her, ripping out the flesh of her heart. With a spray of blood,

Fremy collapsed backward, and the wolf-fiend yelled, “Number seventeen! Don’t let Fremy die!”

Gotcha , Fremy thought.

Specialist number seventeen, who had been observing the battle from safety, went as pale as it could get. The one mission assigned to it was to prevent Fremy’s death. It immediately rushed to the fallen woman’s side. Nearly all the other fiends, including the wolf-fiend, defended number seventeen from Nashetania, Rolonia, and Dozzu’s assault.

With her heart carved out, Fremy very nearly died on the spot, but number seventeen glued its body to her to plug the open hole in her chest.

Its ability was more like repair of the body than healing. Fluid spewed from its body could transform into flesh for the target fiend. It dammed the gushing blood from the gaping hole in Fremy’s chest in a heartbeat, then went to repairing her shredded heart.

That was when number seventeen’s eyes lit on the red mark on Fremy’s chest. It knew that mark.

Number seventeen was not in Tgurneu’s confidence; it didn’t know who the seventh was or for what purpose Fremy had been created, either.

But it did know about the chain death.

It had been about fifty years earlier, long before Fremy was born, when Tgurneu had summoned number seventeen. At that time, Tgurneu had still been using the body of the three-winged fiend. It told number seventeen then about a fiend with a strange power. It was a chain-death fiend with the ability to kill another fiend instantly the moment a different, designated fiend died. It had seemed impossible to understand how such an ability might be used, no matter how you twisted your brain.

Tgurneu had said it was currently researching the chain-death ability in depth. Could the ability be undone with the power of a Saint? Could it be undone with a fiend’s ability? If so, how could that be prevented?

“This chain-death ability will be an important element in our coming battle with the Braves of the Six Flowers,” Tgurneu had said. “I must eliminate even

the slightest possibility of it being undone. I must use all means at my disposal to perfect it. And I need your help in this research.”

Number seventeen had had no choice. It had accepted the order.

The chain-death fiend would extract a very small part of the designated fiend’s body; then, after modifying the flesh, it would transplant it into the body of a different fiend. This extracted flesh would assimilate into the recipient, becoming part of it.

Then, when the donor died, a parasite implanted in its body would sense the death and emit a unique signal to turn the donated flesh into a powerful pathogen that would kill the recipient.

Number seventeen had used its ability to seek out a way to heal the red mark. But the transplant assimilated with its recipient completely. It also changed the nature of the body. Even when the focus of the disease was removed, it quickly regenerated into its previous state. Number seventeen had declared that if it couldn’t remove the mark with its power, no other fiend would be able to do so, either.

Tgurneu had been very satisfied by those research results.

“<Number seventeen! Do *not* allow Fremy to die!>” The wolf-fiend yelled at number seventeen.

Number seventeen was aware that the wolf-fiend wasn’t Tgurneu. *I don’t need you to tell me that* , it thought.

As it healed Fremy, it realized that the place where Fremy had been wounded was the very focal point of the chain-death ability. Was this just a coincidence?

When Rolonia had attacked Fremy, her whip had struck in an unnatural way. It had gone straight for her heart. It couldn’t have been deliberate, could it? Could they have wanted Fremy to pretend to betray the Braves and have number seventeen undo the chain-death ability?

I don’t care, though , number seventeen thought as it continued healing her. The disease couldn’t be cured. No matter what Fremy’s intentions were, it wouldn’t change seventeen’s course of action.

But then, number seventeen saw—just as it restored Fremy's heart, the mark on her chest disappeared, too. Fremy leaped up and called to the Braves, "It worked!"

Number seventeen couldn't believe its eyes. Not because Fremy had switched sides again—but because the chain-death ability was now undone. Seventeen's research should have been flawless. What had just happened should not have had any effect.

Rolonia and Nashetania laid into the fiends around them while Fremy fired a round through number seventeen. Without any combat capabilities, it was unable to defend itself or run.

The last word that came to number seventeen's mind was *Why?*

Fiends mutated—they evolved their bodies by force of will. The stronger the will, the faster the rate of change and the stronger the ability to be gained. Sometimes, fiends even evolved unconsciously.

Once, a fiend had evolved without ever realizing it.

It was called specialist number six, Fremy's mother. She had no abilities other than spawning Fremy. She had sacrificed all her other abilities to accomplish the one thing that was fundamentally impossible for a fiend: giving birth to a human child.

On Tgurneu's orders, number six had raised Fremy. She couldn't do anything else and had been given no other role. She simply devoted everything she had to caring for Fremy and wishing for her healthy growth.

She was the only fiend that had wholeheartedly loved Fremy.

When Fremy was bullied and tormented, number six frantically tried to protect her. When Fremy was hurt, she desperately healed her.

She knew Fremy was the Black Barrenbloom, and she also knew about the chain-death ability that had been cast on her. But she couldn't tell Fremy about that. She wasn't allowed to oppose Tgurneu.

Eventually, number six noticed the chain-death disease was slowly gnawing into Fremy's body. Having been implanted into her heart when she was very

small and fragile, the condition had become a burden on her.

Tgurneu had told number six to leave it be. If it didn't threaten Fremy's life and didn't hinder her in combat, then it didn't care. It wouldn't allow number six to tell Fremy the truth, either, and she couldn't fight her instincts of absolute submission to her commander.

So she would stroke Fremy's heart with her antenna as she lamented her own helplessness to save her. She wanted to ignore Tgurneu's orders and help Fremy. But she didn't give in to that impulse.

Over time, this mutated number six's body—and she never noticed. Neither did Tgurneu, the white lizard-fiend, or anybody else.

Number six acquired the ability to heal Fremy's body and protect her.

Even with this power, she still couldn't remove the effects of the powerful chain-death ability completely. But by stroking Fremy's chest day after day, she slowly weakened the disease.

Between the unusual speed of this mutation and the unique nature of the ability, it was close to a miracle that she acquired it.

The chain-death fiend had died about two years earlier—at Tgurneu's hands.

Tgurneu had found a spy from Dozzu's faction investigating the abilities of its subordinates and feared the chain-death ability would be discovered. And so, Tgurneu made the first move and killed the chain-death fiend.

Then it didn't have the worry about information leaking to Dozzu. Neither did it need to worry anymore about the chain-death fiend itself betraying Tgurneu and undoing the work it had done on Fremy. To Tgurneu, this was killing two birds with one stone.

But had the chain-death fiend lived, it would have noticed the weakened effects on Fremy. Its work never would have been undone.

"It worked!" Fremy left the wolf-fiend and its unit to meet up with Rolonia, Fremy, and Dozzu. Seeing that the mark on Fremy's chest had vanished, Rolonia's face brightened. Nashetania made a triumphant little fist. Dozzu seemed to finally grasp the situation.

“Dozzu! Run into Mora’s clairvoyance range! Tell her that the hostage situation is solved!” Fremy cried.

Dozzu nodded, left the line of battle, and headed northwest to the mountain. With its legs, it would take not even a few minutes.

“Tell her to tell Adlet, too!” Fremy yelled after Dozzu to remind it.

Still lying facedown, Mora clenched the barrier stake. Goldof was barely staving off the onslaught of fiends. Her power was exhausted. The poison from the ground was slowly circulating through her body. She could hardly maintain the barrier for another minute.

That was when Dozzu came sprinting into the range of her clairvoyance. To Mora, this was like salvation from the heavens; she hadn’t known what the others were doing all this time.

Dozzu said quietly that they wanted her to inform Adlet that Fremy was freed from the hostage situation through her mountain echo—that she wouldn’t die if Tgurneu did. Dozzu also told her to carry out the plan immediately.

So Mora used her power of mountain echo and yelled one more time into the sky, **“Adlet! Can you hear me? Fremy has been released!”**

Though the poison was circulating through his body and his vision was blurring, Hans’s eyes didn’t leave Tgurneu for an instant. He believed there would be a chance to turn things around, and he wasn’t going to miss it.

“...Is that true?” Tgurneu discussed this with one of the fiends nearby. And then, it began to laugh loudly. “Ha-ha-ha! That’s amazing! Just great! What on earth has happened?” Tgurneu laughed for a while, then turned to Hans. “I’ll tell you something good. Listen: Fremy undid her curse. If I die now, she won’t die with me!”

“*Meow*, what did ya say?” It was difficult for Hans to believe this out of the blue. Then he heard Mora’s mountain echo from the distance. It told him that Tgurneu was speaking the truth.

“I can’t believe it. I worked so hard to come up with countermeasures to prevent them from undoing it. To think it would be broken, ha-ha-ha. It’s like a miracle.” Tgurneu was laughing at its own plans being foiled—and Hans

understood the reason why.

It was too late. All of it.

If Adlet had held on for just a little longer, he could have killed Tgurneu. If Fremy had been a little faster, she could have saved Adlet. But neither had been in time.

Even knowing that the others wouldn't hear it, Hans yelled, "Guys! Don't go through with the plan! It got leaked a long time ago!"

Hans's reaction made Tgurneu laugh again. "It's no use. They're still fixated on saving their friend. Had they run, they'd have had a sliver of hope."

Hans yelled again—at Adlet, swallowed by the hippo-fiend. "Adlet! Fight! If ya kill Tgurneu neow, Fremy ain't gonna die!"

With a smile, Tgurneu said, "It's no use. He can't hear anything anymore."

In the stomach of the fiend, Adlet blamed himself over and over.

He'd felt suffocated for some time now, and it seemed the sensation wasn't just because he was trapped inside the stomach of the fiend. He could tell he'd absorbed poison. Was it just him, or had Hans and the other Braves been hit by it, too?

Then a tentacle reached out to him. A needle in it pierced his flesh, and his difficulty breathing eased. Apparently, he'd been injected with an antitoxin—he didn't understand what for, though.

But he didn't care anymore. In fact, it hurt that he'd survived at all.

All the Braves but Fremy were going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it. He was powerless. Even if he did resist Tgurneu, there was no point. He was just that thing's toy, and there was nothing he could do...

He thought of Fremy. Had the fiends welcomed her, now that she'd betrayed the Braves? Would they forgive her after she'd killed so many of their kind? Tgurneu had said Adlet was the only one she wanted to save. Had that not made the fiends resent her?

Adlet prayed with all his heart that she would be forgiven.

For some reason, Tgurneu was maintaining its control over him. He still loved Fremy just as much as he had before his capture. "...Please, Fremy. Be happy," he murmured. The world was ending, but he'd managed to make her happy. It was a small saving grace to him, even if he knew it was because of false love.

His ears plugged, he could hear nothing of what was going on outside.

He wasn't interested—because even if he did know, a toy of Tgurneu's wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

It all happened at once. The very moment Dozzu returned from communicating with Mora, Fremy sent the signal out to all the Braves. Rolonia dashed the firecracker ignition device on the ground, and instantly, countless lights flared up throughout the forest. As they watched, the lights grew, and in a heartbeat, the forest was enveloped in flame. There had to have been about three hundred fiends still in there. The trees were swallowed in the fire, and from a distance, they could hear the screams.

Fremy watched the messenger-fiends fall to the ground, their wing roots scorched by Fremy's gunpowder and unable to fly. Fremy also shot specialist number twenty-four beside the wolf-fiend, while Rolonia and Nashetania placed themselves to the east and west to kill all messengers except the leopard.

All that remained was to wait for the leopard-fiend to run a message. Dozzu concentrated on the creature, waiting for it to move.

But it never did. And there was no sign the wolf-fiend would speak to it.

"...It can't be," Fremy murmured.

As soon as the forest went up in flames, Goldof raced off. With the exhausted Mora slung over his shoulder, he covered them both with the flame-resistant cloths Adlet had given them.

Fiends writhed in agony among the blazing trees. Many tried escaping the forest, but they were prevented by the fires rising up every which way and ended up swallowed by the flames instead. They tried weaving between the gaps, but they crashed into one another and couldn't get away.

Only Goldof, protected by the flame-retardant cloth, was able to leap into the

fire. It burned his armor and charred his skin, but it wasn't enough to kill him.

But right when he was about to escape— “Ngh!”

The attack came from the shadows under the canopy and from between the trees. Goldof was shocked. The only explanation was that the enemy had known about their escape route and was lying in wait for him.

Normally, he would have zigzagged past the enemies to evade them, but thanks to the poison ravaging his body, he was clearly slowing down.

When would the leopard-fiend move? Fremy waited. They had to kill Tgurneu now, or they couldn't save Adlet.

“Fremy! Retreat! The plan has failed!” Dozzu yelled.

But Fremy still couldn't leave the spot and kept fighting the attacking fiends.

The wolf-fiend was chuckling. So it had seen through their plan, after all. Had Adlet leaked the information during his capture? Or had Tgurneu just figured out what they would do?

“...Dozzu, Rolonia, Nashetania—run!” Fremy yelled. She still couldn't give up on Adlet.

“What purpose is there in you staying alone?!” Dozzu demanded.

Rolonia threw the firecracker that was their signal for retreat at the ground to tell their distant allies to flee. “Fremy, run, please!” she yelled.

But Fremy was still thinking—was there some other way to find Adlet? Was there a way to save him?

The scattered fiends gradually gathered around the wolf-fiend. With every passing moment, the wall of enemies around them closed in.

Inside the stomach of the fiend, Adlet continued praying for Fremy's happiness when, suddenly, his expression clouded.

Something was strange. He tried thinking back on everything that had happened, but his head wouldn't work right. He was exhausted, and he had given up on everything. But his mind wouldn't stop. The one feeling that remained in him, his wish for Fremy's happiness, drove him forward.

Even just remembering his conversation with Tgurneu was painful. But he examined every single thing the fiend had said.

“...!” Adlet realized what was really behind his sense that something didn’t quite add up. It had come after Tgurneu had told him of Fremy’s surrender.

If Fremy had betrayed them, she would have told them about the plan herself. But Tgurneu had fixated on getting that information out of him. It was possible Tgurneu had known about the plan and still wanted the information from Adlet anyway. But after Adlet’s confession, the goat-fiend beside Tgurneu had murmured *You finally got it out of him* .

“...Damn it.”

Adlet realized what that meant.

Fremy hadn’t actually surrendered. Had Tgurneu been lying? Or was her betrayal a pretense on her part? Either way, Fremy was still fighting the fiends.

“What a disaster,” Adlet muttered. He was furious at how stubborn she was. The only way for her to be happy was to give up and return to the fiends, but she was still carrying on with this pointless fight.

Adlet had prevented them from ever winning. No—beating Tgurneu had been impossible all along because everything about this fight had followed its predictions to the letter.

“Stop it, Fremy. Give it up.” If she dragged this out any longer, she might be cut off from the fiends forever. They might never forgive her.

The only thing Adlet wanted was for Fremy to be happy. The thought that he’d succeeded at that had been his one solace in the face of the world’s destruction.

Then Adlet remembered. The gunpowder board Fremy had made for him before he’d gone chasing after Hans—the one that would tell her to surrender when there was no more hope—it was still in his belt pouch. He moved his restrained arm, and the tentacle binding it tightened. The hippo-fiend had been ordered not to let him escape.

“Stop it. I’m gonna make her surrender. This is gonna help you guys.”

The tentacle's grip did not loosen. Could the hippo-fiend not hear him, or was it just refusing to listen?

"...Ngh!" Yanking against the restraint as hard as he could, he stuffed his hand into the belt pouch, grabbed the gunpowder board, and scratched its surface with his nails. Fremy would know it had exploded. If she got the message, she would surrender.

But no explosion came. *Did it get wet?* Adlet wondered. But then, he noticed something was wrong.

Instead of detonating, the surface of the gunpowder board had just broken a little. Adlet was confused, but he kept feeling the board. His fingers slid across an irregularity in the surface. It seemed to be fine writing.

Fremy could manifest solid chunks of gunpowder in her hands, and she also had control over what shape those chunks would take. She could create a board with words carved into it. Stroking the letters, Adlet read the message.

The first line read: FORGET IT . I'M NOT SURRENDERING.

Adlet shifted his finger, tracing the letters on the second line.

I'M GOING TO FIGHT AND DIE—TO THE END.

"...You idiot. Why are you fighting?"

Adlet despaired. *Someone kill me* , he thought again. He could no longer bear the weight of his choice to destroy the world with his own hands, and he couldn't even protect the one person he loved. "No more! Let me die! Please! Kill me! I beg of you!" he screamed. His voice reached no one.

She had to still be fighting. She was still struggling to save Adlet and beat Tgurneu.

"Fremy...stop it. What are you fighting for?"

I have to run. It took Fremy three minutes after she'd found out the plan had failed to realize it. But she was rooted there by the feeling that, if she fled now, Adlet would die.

"We're going to be completely surrounded! We really will lose anywhere to run!" Dozzu shouted, spurring Fremy to finally make a dash for their escape

route. If they all died here, Adlet would never be saved.

A mere three minutes—but it was a fatal delay.

The four raced for the opening Dozzu had cleared for them, but a unit of fiends was blocking the way. Fremy tried routing them with her bombs and pushing forward, but enemies streamed in from both sides. When she drove back the fiends coming from the sides, next, they attacked from the rear. When she blocked that wave, more came from the front.

“This is bad! They likely knew our escape route beforehand!” Dozzu yelled. “I suspect the enemy will have been deployed at our meeting point, too. We have no choice but to head somewhere else!”

“We have to tell Chamo and Mora!” said Rolonia.

“We’ll have our hands full just surviving,” Nashetania replied.

As they battled the fiends, Fremy blamed herself. If she’d made the decision to run just a little earlier, they might have been able to survive this, at least.

Rolonia’s whip and Nashetania’s blades were slowing down. Fremy was all right, but the poison was slowly getting to the others. With her mind entirely occupied with thoughts of Adlet, she’d failed to notice they were in trouble.

That was when Rolonia approached her during a pause in her whip flailing and curses. “Don’t give up, Fremy,” she whispered.

Fremy shook off the crushing despair. They would get away, survive, and keep fighting. As long as they were alive, they were sure to find a way out.

It’s no use —so Rolonia might normally have said, slumping to the ground. But instead, she was flailing and yelling.

It was all a disaster. The poison was spreading through her body, and she was so preoccupied with fighting, she couldn’t spare the energy to fend it off.

But still, her allies were with her now. She felt helpless, but they would all surely find a way out of this. What she was capable of doing now was believing and powering through it. That was all. As long as the others weren’t giving up, she could keep from losing heart, too.

Goldof continued driving his spear into the fiends that blocked his path. He

was headed for the center of the ruins, to the southeast. Nashetania and the others had to be there.

Why was I born this strong? Goldof wondered. Once, he had cursed his excessive strength, but he knew now it was what enabled him to protect people.

The plan had failed, so he had to get all his allies out. He was the only one who could.

“Adlet! Flee! The plan has failed!” On Goldof’s back, Mora shouted in her mountain echo. She tried communicating the situation to Adlet as she clung to her dimming consciousness.

She wasn’t yet helpless. Dying could come after she’d done everything she could.

Hans felt numbness in his fingertips. He was slowly losing his sense of balance. Not only was his whole body exhausted, he was still inhaling the poison torture. His fight in the thread cocoon had gone on for so long. At this point, he was baffled that he was still alive.

Tgurneu put a hand to its ear to listen to the battles in the distance. “It seems they’re still clinging to life. They don’t know when to give up—not the Braves, and not you, either. But I don’t mind your kind.” Tgurneu smiled. “It’s just like Adlet.”

Meow, makes me feel sick to be compared to that idiot , Hans thought.

Inside the fiend’s stomach, Adlet considered—If Fremy would never surrender, then what should he do?

As long as the chain-death ability existed, he couldn’t kill Tgurneu, and he’d never find a way to undo it on this battlefield. Tgurneu had declared using the Book of Truth that even it didn’t know a way to undo it.

The Black Barrenbloom couldn’t be stopped. The only way would be to kill Tgurneu or Fremy herself. He couldn’t protect the other Braves, either. But if he escaped from here, he and Fremy could survive alone. Tgurneu had said that the power of the Black Barrenbloom wouldn’t make the seventh crest disappear.

But then what? Would they fight to the bitter end, just him and Fremy on their own? Would they keep fleeing from Tgurneu and try to slay the Evil God together? No way. Fremy was strong, but they'd never be able to kill all the fiends that were left.

And he wasn't the strongest in the world or anything close... He was just Tgurneu's toy.

"I can't beat Tgurneu...," Adlet moaned. He had accepted this as an incontrovertible fact. No matter what schemes he came up with, no matter what secret tools he used, they would never work on the fiend commander. There was no way he could overcome the one who'd created him.

He wailed and sobbed like a child. At this rate, Fremy would continue struggling until her demise. Twisting his body, Adlet tried prying off the tentacles. But they held him tight, and he couldn't move at all. "Please...please let me protect Fremy. No one...can save the world...anymore. So just let me save her..."

Nobody heard him, and he cried until he had no more tears left.

"What are you fighting for, Fremy?" Adlet asked. At that moment, his finger happened to slide on the gunpowder board, and he realized that, a little farther down, there was a third line carved on it.

I WILL MAKE YOU HAPPY .

"...You idiot," Adlet muttered.

Why was she fighting? That one line gave him his answer. He had protected her and loved her, and she couldn't abandon him. And because she'd never opened her heart, he understood how much emotion this one line carried.

But there was no point in protecting him. He didn't deserve to be happy. Manipulated by Tgurneu, he had betrayed his allies and chosen to doom the world. If her wish was for his happiness, it would never come true. If her joy was contingent on his, then it was a gift he would never, ever be able to give her.

The road to her happiness had long since been cut off.

“Gwagh!” The tentacle squeezed around his body, cracking bones and trying to keep him immobile. *I’d rather it just finish me off all at once*, Adlet thought. Every bone in his body creaked. *Is this really the end now?* he wondered.

Countless memories rose up and disappeared again in his head—all of her.

Their first meeting. Back in the Phantasmal Barrier, when he’d taken her as his hostage and ran. Embracing her in the Fainting Mountains. In the Temple of Fate, when she’d asked him to save her.

His last recollection was of the words he’d exchanged with her just a few hours ago. It felt like the distant past now.

“Smile, no matter what happens. That’s enough for me.”

A smile appeared through Adlet’s tears.

There was no way he could show his face to Fremy at the moment, but right now, smiling was the one thing he could do for her.

“!”

Something mysterious happened. His body began resisting the strangulation all on its own. His arm, close to breaking, grabbed the tentacle and twisted it away.

I’m an idiot, Adlet derided himself. *You’re still gonna resist? Even though you’re nothing more than Tgurneu’s toy. Even though you’re just a fake hero.* Despite understanding that all that stood before him was despair, strength welled up in him once more when he smiled.

“...Damn it.”

All he had left was his desire for Fremy’s happiness. The fake love planted by Tgurneu. Nothing else.

But Fremy had sworn with that gunpowder board that she would make him happy. If that was what she wanted, if that would make her content, then he had to oblige. And to find his own happiness, he had to keep fighting.

It was impossible. Adlet understood that painfully well.

But even if it was impossible, he kept pushing. He kept resisting the pressure

of the tentacle.

He'd never become the strongest man in the world. He hadn't managed to be its savior, either. He'd never get revenge for his sister and his friend or make Fremy happy, either.

But he kept struggling anyway.

Four years ago, Tgurneu had spoken with its confidant, the three-winged fiend. It was then that it had decided to make Adlet the seventh. But the three-winged fiend just hadn't been able to accept that decision, stubbornly pressing Tgurneu to explain its reasoning.

"Fine. I'll explain it to you. It's because Adlet has no talents at all."

The three-winged fiend seemed to doubt its ears.

"And he's aware of it. It's painfully clear to him that he lacks aptitude for anything. But he still doesn't give up. That's the reason I chose him."

The three-winged fiend was completely perplexed.

"Before aspiring to a grand goal, all humans think to themselves *I'm sure I can do this* . That's why they do it at all. But such a human can't overcome the impossible.

"The one who can is someone who takes up a challenge even knowing that it cannot be done. They may have no aptitudes, no chances of winning, but they still can't give up the challenge. Only one with such determination can make the impossible possible."

"You mean to säy Adlet is such a përson?"

Tgurneu nodded. "He won't give up. Even knowing it's a goal that is beyond him, he will keep trying. There is no other human like that. I believe the determination he possesses surpasses any talent or aptitude.

"That is why I have chosen Adlet Mayer."

"Fremy!" Adlet yelled. The tentacle around him twisted and tore off. His arm freed, the binding on his legs loosened.

He wasn't thinking about how Tgurneu was controlling him anymore. He

didn't even care if his feelings were fake. Right now, in this moment, he loved Fremy.

He crawled for the fiend's mouth, but its tentacles tried to drag him back. His bones ground uncomfortably, and his hair was tearing out as he pulled his upper body out of the fiend's stomach. "I swear I'll make you happy!"

Adlet crushed the hippo-fiend's eye with his fist, and it screamed and writhed. He slid out of its mouth and rolled onto the ground. The scene that greeted him was unchanged from before he'd been swallowed.

But Adlet saw that Tgurneu was stunned—and that Hans was yelling something. He couldn't hear what he was saying.

A fiend set on him from behind, trying to capture him again, but Adlet rolled forward to evade it. When he shook out the mucus the tentacles had poured into his ears, his hearing began to return.

"...Failed...em...ed."

Adlet hadn't realized Mora was yelling with her mountain echo. He couldn't quite hear what she was saying.

"...re...saved, *meow* !"

Adlet focused on listening. He couldn't understand Hans, either, but eventually, his hearing returned to normal.

"Adlet! Flee! Fremy has been released, but the plan has failed!"

Even now that Adlet could hear Mora, he couldn't believe his ears. Overcome with surprise, he forgot everything.

Just then, Hans darted up to him to block an attack coming at him from behind. Adlet asked, "Has Fremy been saved?"

"Ya heard? It sounds like she meownaged somethin' herself."

"Then..." Adlet's eyes turned to Tgurneu farther away, who looked ready to fight. "Fremy isn't gonna die anymore? We can kill Tgurneu?"

Hans gave a definite nod. Adlet's shoulders started shaking. He couldn't hold back the laughter welling within him. "Looks like it wasn't impossible this time."

The eastern sky was beginning to turn pale. Dawn was close.

Adlet had a feeling. Either he or Tgurneu would see the coming sunset—but only one of them.

Chapter 6
Love's
Conclusion

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Love's Conclusion

Something's funny. Chamo couldn't stop thinking it—even when she'd been furious over Hans's betrayal of her, when she'd furiously dumped Fremy and Nashetania for being dumb and told them to go do whatever, and when she'd been driving off fiends' attacks during her search for Hans.

She was using a third of her slave-fiends to protect herself. These enemies were way weaker than the ones she'd fought with Hans, and they couldn't even get close to her. She'd instructed the rest of her slave-fiends to disperse across the whole of the ruins. The enemy was interfering with some of them, but still, they should have been able to find *something* in the ruins.

Chamo had told them to return immediately if they found any clue, no matter how small. But none had come back. Was Hans not in the ruins anymore? Chamo still couldn't tell.

"...Yeah, something's funny," she muttered. She remembered back when they'd fought with the fiend elites, before they'd come here. Those fiends had been strong. If Hans had betrayed her then, he could have killed her easily. But he'd even saved her after she fell and fiends attacked her.

So Hans's goal hadn't been to kill her. But she was clueless as to what he or Tgurneu was really after.

That was when a single slave-fiend returned. Ignoring the nearby enemies, it came to Chamo's side with a weapon in its mouth—one of Hans's throwing knives.

"Huh? ...What's this?"

There were words written on it, as well as signs that someone had tried to wipe them off, but the letters hadn't been totally erased. If she looked closely, she could still read them. It was definitely Hans's handwriting.

REVEAL TO EVERYONE THAT YOU'RE THE SEVENTH. OR GIVE ME PROOF IT'S YOU. THEN, I'LL TELL YOU HOW TO SAVE FREMY.

Chamo was confused. Based on the message, it seemed Hans had given instructions to someone.

Then Chamo remembered—Hans had tossed those throwing knives at Adlet more than once. “...What the heck?”

Examining the writing on the knife, Chamo kept thinking.

A stench wafted around her, and Mora’s mountain echo warned of a poison in the air. Still, Chamo didn’t stop thinking. She could leave this place later. Flames rose up suddenly on the distant mountain. But Chamo ignored that, too. She heard Mora’s mountain echo informing them that Fremy had been saved and that the plan had failed.

But Chamo didn’t move, still studying the knife.

“I can kill Tgurneu, right?” Adlet asked, picking up his fallen sword.

Watching him, Tgurneu was almost touched. So its seventh, the one it had had such high hopes for, was indeed this great a man? Even now, he still hadn’t considered accepting his fate?

Adlet was on his feet again, but that changed nothing about the situation. He was just an extra body beside Hans, who had outlived his time. They couldn’t call their allies. They couldn’t take down the commander, and they couldn’t prevent the others from dying, either. This just meant Tgurneu would be able to taste the joy of crushing his love once again. To Tgurneu, Adlet’s comeback was actually a happy miscalculation—or so it should have been.

The fiend was confused. What was this trembling welling up from the center of its fig?

Why was it afraid?

Still confused, Tgurneu considered how to direct its subordinates. First, it would take down the silk cocoon. It would summon all its minions from around the ruins and order them to keep Adlet and Hans from escaping. Then, Tgurneu would flee.

But the moment it arrived at that decision, Hans said, “If yer scared, why don’cha run, Tgurneu?”

Of course I'll run , Tgurneu thought. But Hans's next remark stabbed it through the heart.

"At this rate, you'll end up losin' cuz of the miracles of love." Hans was smiling. He was clearly provoking Tgurneu to keep it here.

But though aware of the tactic, Tgurneu swallowed its order to retreat. "There's nothing for me to be concerned about. I'll kill you and capture Adlet again."

"Meow-hee-hee-hee! Well, thank ya! But yer the one who's gonna die here!"

Despite Hans's scorn, Tgurneu couldn't bring itself to run.

If it fled now, that would mean acknowledging it feared the power of love. It would be accepting defeat at the hands of the love that so drove Adlet. And Tgurneu couldn't do that.

The power of love existed for Tgurneu. Never something to fear. Tgurneu was the one who used it. Who destroyed it. This fiend would never be the one scampering off in confusion.

If Tgurneu was to flee in fear of love even once, that experience would scar its heart with a sense of inferiority, a feeling that would leave it unable to find joy in love's demise ever again.

It may have been an illogical choice, but it was inescapable. This was who Tgurneu was.

Tgurneu bared its fangs. Claws shot from its fingers, and its tail snapped like a whip. It approached Hans and Adlet slowly, wordlessly. The ten fiends of its guard, who had not participated in this battle thus far, also stepped away from its defense and moved to attack. Tgurneu was finally leaving its leisurely, cloistered position to join the battle. Hans's provocation had worked. Had it escaped them, their chance of victory would have been nil.

"Haa!" With a shout, Tgurneu dashed toward the Braves. The speed of its steps was neither faster nor slower than Hans's. As its body, Tgurneu employed a fiend with the head of a mouse. It seemed to have great agility.

Using the claws on both its hands, it made to kill Hans and Adlet

simultaneously. The two leaned back and barely avoided the strikes. Tgurneu's second attack flowed toward Hans, but Hans's sword blocked it while Adlet threw a needle to stop the third.

"Stay close!" Hans yelled. They had to protect each other, or they wouldn't be able to fend off Tgurneu's strikes. As they defended themselves from the continuous onslaught from Tgurneu's claws, the other nearby fiends joined in.

"Adlet! Ya don't have no meowr tools?!" Hans cried.

Adlet replied, "I destroyed them! The flash grenades, the flute, the firecrackers—everything!"

They guarded each other's backs as they weathered attack after attack. If Tgurneu had escaped, the Braves would have been done for. But the fiend's refusal to run still didn't mean they had a shot at winning.

Adlet was desperately trying to think of a way out. All he had left in the way of tools, though, were one Saint's Spike and various types of needles. The rest he had used in combat or destroyed on Tgurneu's orders. Even if he wanted to call for their allies, he had no means of doing so.

"Meaowr!" Hans's sword crossed with Tgurneu's claws, which shot out at a frightening speed. Hans was clearly moving slower than usual.

Adlet protected his companion, keeping the fiends at bay with paralysis needles. He didn't have that many. He had to summon the other Braves somehow. At this rate, the two wouldn't last ten minutes.

The bird-faced fiend attacked Adlet from behind. As he kicked it away, Adlet racked his brain.

He could tell that one of Tgurneu's minions was using some kind of fiend ability. It had to be something that would conceal their presence, making it hard for others to find them.

That was when Adlet noticed a cluster of fiends in one corner of the square: the spider-fiend and the ape-fiend that had been by Tgurneu's side before. They were the only ones just watching from the sidelines without participating in the battle. One had to have the ability to conceal their presence.

“Go for them!” Adlet pointed at the corner of the square. But before Hans could even make a move, the spider spat out thread to create a defensive wall. Adlet threw needles at them, but they weren’t enough to kill the two fiends.

“No go, *meow* ... Think up somethin’, Adlet,” said Hans. They had no choice but to break through the concealing ability, after all.

The ability seemed incredibly powerful, but it couldn’t be perfect. If it were, Tgurneu would have needed to make Adlet break his tools. Tgurneu had ordered him to throw away his flash grenades, and that meant bright light could communicate their location to their allies. But Adlet had nothing left in his arsenal that emitted light.

That wasn’t all—Tgurneu had also told him to destroy his bombs and his fiend-calling flute. And when Hans had yelled out, Tgurneu had ordered the fiends throughout the ruins to wail and drown out his voice. The ruins still resounded with the noise.

Sound. Adlet was certain that if he could just make a noise that would reach the whole of the ruins—enough to drown out all the fiends’ cries—he could inform their allies of their location.

It was a simple solution. But Tgurneu had made sure that door was closed to him. Adlet had no more implements to make any loud noises.

“*Meow!* Do somethin’! Yer the only one we can count on now!” Hans shouted miserably. The fiends were descending on them from all sides, focusing their attacks on Adlet to prevent him from calling reinforcements. He blocked their strikes with his sword and armor.

Tgurneu kicked Hans back. As Hans tumbled clumsily along the ground, Tgurneu looked away. Hans had to have been waiting for that moment. The pathetic cry was also a sham, to make Tgurneu overconfident.

“*Hrmeow!*” Hans came out of the roll and instantly switched directions, leaping with the strength of his arms alone now that Tgurneu was distracted and switching targets to Adlet.

“!”

One of Hans’s swords pierced Tgurneu’s stomach. The fiend tried to pull it

out, but Hans's other blade sliced off its mouse head, which rolled onto the ground.

"Meow!"

But the headless fiend was still moving. It stabbed its own stomach with a hand, plunging it all the way in to grab the fig and toss it backward—all so fast even Hans couldn't respond. The gigantic dog-fiend behind it instantly dashed for the fig. Adlet threw a needle to keep it back, but the dog-fiend swept the needle aside with its tail and caught its tiny commander in its mouth.

"Whoops, that was close. How careless of me... It seems I have to be a little more cautious," the dog-fiend said in Tgurneu's voice. Its tone was not as sedate as it had been, but that lack of composure meant that Adlet and Hans were now even deeper in danger.

Tgurneu would no longer be careless.

"I'll focus on support, after all. I'll leave offense to you," it ordered, and the other fiends attacked.

I really have to call for help somehow, Adlet thought. But no matter how he thought about it, he still didn't have any tools that could make a lot of noise.

Are we stuck? Just as the question entered his mind, he recalled what Atreau had once told him, and all his training began trickling back.

What Atreau regarded as important above all else was the training of the eye. He had said that when under attack, even when you were certain of your victory, you should always be observing the world around you. Atreau had taught him that his secret weapons were not only what was tucked into his pouches. *Think of everything in the world as your weapon.*

Adlet's eyes roved. The faint light of the sun told him things that had been obscured before—about the thread cocoon, the situation in the square, and the many crumbling buildings surrounding it.

"Hans, get back," Adlet ordered. "And guard me!"

Hans was trying to go for Tgurneu, in the dog-fiend's body. At Adlet's instruction, he shifted back and defended the young man from the fiends'

attacks instead. At the same time, Adlet clenched the grip of his sword and fired the blade.

He wasn't aiming it at Tgurneu or for its guards. His target was outside the silk cocoon—one of the delapidated buildings. It was the tallest tower in the ruins, probably once the center of the people's lives. Adlet knew the center of every town and village had a system to inform the residents of unusual events.

The blade of Adlet's sword landed a clean hit on the chain supporting the bell hanging from the top of that tower. The bell swayed wide, and when the chain failed to bear its weight, it fell to the ground. The crashing *gong* rang out into the forest.

"It's no use." Tgurneu smiled. "That's not going to be loud enough to reach the Braves. They're far away now."

Fremy was still flinging bombs at the fiends around her in search of an escape route. Rolonia and Nashetania appeared to be in pain. Only Fremy and Dozzu were doing all right.

"Watch out!" Dozzu cried as it protected Fremy with a lightning bolt. The enemy was going for Fremy's limbs, still with no apparent intention of killing her. But it was only a matter of time before they captured her.

Fremy listened hard. Was Adlet calling for help? Had anything strange happened? She heard nothing.

Goldof was fighting to escape, too. All he could hear were the cries of the burning fiends and the wailing of more in the distance.

Staring at that knife blade, Chamo was certain: Hans was not the seventh. When he'd attacked her and called himself the seventh, it was all an act. Had he really been the seventh, he would never have let her get away, and he wouldn't have demanded proof from Adlet that he was the seventh, either.

Chamo didn't understand what Hans was trying to do or what he was thinking, but it was clear that the real prisoner here wasn't Adlet—it was Hans.

"...Hng!" The poison was spreading inside her, but she didn't order her scattered slave-fiends to gather to her. She couldn't abandon Hans when he was all alone.

That was when Chamo thought she heard a metallic sound far away. But she didn't even know from which direction it had come.

"...Grek."

However, something else did react to the sound of the bell: two of the slave-fiends Chamo had dispatched into the ruins. They had attempted to enter the square once before, but specialist number eleven's power had diverted their attention away from it, ultimately sending them headed in the opposite direction.

But at the sudden sound of the bell, the slave-fiends stopped and turned. One remained in place while the other immediately ran off to Chamo.

Specialist number eleven was at the edge of the thread cocoon, still using its power as it hid in the shadow of a ruined building. When that bell had fallen to the ground, it had panicked, but the sound wasn't loud enough to reach the Braves. Eleven was certain they wouldn't be able to overcome its ability.

Tgurneu had ordered number eleven to kill itself, but it hadn't abandoned its loyalty to Tgurneu. *I was wrong*, it told itself, devoting all its being to Tgurneu's purpose—and to the Evil God's.

Continuously pouring all its energy into its ability, number eleven never noticed the slave-fiend approaching the silk cocoon, ready to spit acid at it.

Or Chamo, charging it from behind.

Having lost his sword, Adlet borrowed one of Hans's to engage the fiends, but with just one blade, Hans's attack power was halved. A fiend's arm skimmed Hans's head, taking advantage of a brief opening.

"*Meow!*" Hans fell, but Adlet saved him with his throwing needles and Hans's own sword.

Hold on, Adlet told himself.

Then, all the fiends—including Tgurneu's dog-like form—descended on them as a horde. Just as Adlet thought *I can't dodge them all*, there was a call nearby.

"Catboy!"

Every fiend turned toward the voice, and Adlet took the opportunity to scoop

up Hans and escape the center of the horde.

One after another, slave-fiends were ripping through the thread cocoon and bursting into the square. Tgurneu and the fiends all seemed shocked.

They were saved. But a moment later, Adlet remembered—Chamo believed Hans was the enemy. She'd been so enraged, she'd lost her head and gone after him. "Chamo! Hans isn't the enemy!"

The slave-fiends were charging for Adlet when from his arms Hans yelled, "Kill Tgurneu! Adlet's on our side now!" That order stopped the slave-fiends in their tracks. Adlet was shocked. Chamo shouldn't have known he was the seventh.

"...Chamo knew it. You weren't the enemy, catboy. So what about Adlet? Has he betrayed Tgurneu?" Adlet worried about how to explain the situation, but Chamo ignored him as she scanned the battlefield. "Well, whatever. We'll think about it after Tgurneu's dead. Which one is it?"

In response to Chamo's question, the dog-fiend stepped forward. "Me."

"Huh. So you're announcing yourself? You're not gonna sneak around and hide anymore?"

"Indeed not. Because I don't need to run." Tgurneu seemed quite unruffled.

That was when Adlet realized—Chamo was panting hard, and her movements seemed a little twitchy. She wasn't okay, either. She'd inhaled the poison in the air around the ruins.

"With you in that state, I can win easily."

The two fiends and slave-fiends moved at the same time, crashing together in the center of the square. Adlet and Hans quickly jumped to the side to avoid becoming embroiled themselves.

At Tgurneu's direction, one fiend vomited up something that looked like a conch shell, and another fiend blew it. Adlet could tell it was like his own fiend-calling flute. Tgurneu was summoning all its allies in the ruins.

Chamo pulled a flash grenade out of her pocket and threw it into the air. For just an instant, the whole area was enveloped in intense light. That was the signal they'd decided would mean they had discovered Tgurneu.

In the dog-fiend's body, Tgurneu charged Chamo, but her slave-fiends stood in front of her, blocking its path. Both sides had called for support, but neither had any intention of relying on it. They meant to finish this personally.

Fremy, Nashetania, Rolonia, and Dozzu were on the northwest side of the ruins, surrounded by fiends.

The sudden light made Fremy doubt her eyes. The flash grenade was the signal they'd discovered Tgurneu. Had Adlet thrown it? Or Chamo?

At roughly the same moment, Fremy's ears caught a sound like a conch flute being blown. Only fiends could hear it, and it was coming from the very direction where she'd seen that flash of light.

The four had been trying to escape, but now they instantly changed course. This battle to flee was already nearly hopeless anyway. The only way out now was to kill Tgurneu.

The wolf-fiend was occupied with preventing the party's retreat when it heard the sound of the conch flute. That was Tgurneu's emergency signal—the order to cancel all operations and join their commander in battle.

I have to rush to Tgurneu's side immediately, it thought. But then, it realized it had a more important role—to keep the four here from getting close.

"Everyone, listen! I'm nöt Tgurneu! I was only prétending to be, on the Cómmander's örders!" There was no longer any reason for it to keep up the charade, although the fiends that weren't aware of the situation were shocked. "All fiends of this förce, stop these four fröm leaving—or die here! But dön't kill Fremy! These are Cómmander Tgurneu's örders!"

The two Braves, Nashetania, and Dozzu took advantage of the wolf-fiend's distraction as it set about giving orders to escape the encirclement and attempt to make their way to the southwest, but the wolf-fiend shot after them, blocking their path with its own body. Ignoring Fremy's bullets thudding into its flesh, it attacked.

Less than forty fiends protected Tgurneu. Hans had already whittled down ten, and a few of those remaining weren't combat-oriented. Opposite them, Chamo had about fifty slave-fiends. Numerically, hers was the superior position.

The fiends blocked the slave-fiends' attacks as they charged for Chamo, Tgurneu's canine form at their center. The commander was no longer on the defensive; it had turned the tide.

The dog-fiend wasn't that strong. It could hardly compare to the three-winged fiend Tgurneu had controlled when the Braves first met it and the yeti-fiend it inhabited during their second encounter. But despite that, this battle was not going in the heroes' favor. The slave-fiends were being pushed back.

"Watch out! Chamo!" Adlet cut down an enemy that had circled around to the side. But the slave-fiends were immediately suspicious, baring their fangs at him.

"Meow , Chamo, Adlet's on our side. Focus on Tgurneu."

"Chamo's got no idea what happened." She shot Adlet a cold look. Adlet kept on analyzing the combat situation.

The enemy's strength was in their skilled coordination. They were good at dealing with small numbers of foes as a unit, but even against a large force, they still moved in a controlled manner. Meanwhile, the slave-fiends were sluggish. Some momentarily crumbled into their mud form. This was the first time Adlet had ever seen that happen. Chamo was gradually losing her capacity to command the slave-fiends.

"Cómmander Tgurneu!" And then, to top it off, there was a cry from outside the square. The fiends spread throughout the ruins were uniting together here. Chamo dispatched about twenty of her slave-fiends around the square to block the reinforcements.

"...Ngh."

They really couldn't let this go on long. Hans gave Adlet a look, and Adlet returned it. He was thinking the same thing.

Having dropped its performance as Tgurneu, the wolf-fiend charged after Fremy again and again, and she blocked the attacks with the grip of her gun as she rolled backward to avoid her assailant.

The wolf-fiend was strong. Even after being shot multiple times, it still wouldn't go down, and there was no time for her to create any bombs.

She had to go to the source of that flash grenade—and quickly. She had to drive back the fiends around them and buy her allies time to get away. This was Fremy's job, as the one whose attacks covered the widest range.

"Ngh!" But the wolf-fiend could tell what she was trying to do and was attacking fast and hard to keep her from doing it.

"It's so säd, Fremy. If you'd obediently súrrendered, we would have fórgiven everything," it taunted.

"Please, Fremy, find a way to push the enemy back!" pleaded Nashetania.

"We can't carve a way through on our own!" cried Dozzu. With fiend after fiend piling on, it wasn't able to fire its most powerful lightning blasts. Nashetania's steel wasn't enough to clear a path, either.

Suddenly, Rolonia briefly stopped fighting with her whip and ran toward Dozzu, grabbed its small body, and flung the fiend eastward.

"!"

As Dozzu bounced and rolled away from the enemies that had encircled it, Rolonia's whip wrapped around Fremy and threw her in the same direction.

The fiends took that as their chance to descend upon Rolonia. She defended herself with her armor, but it couldn't absorb all the impact.

"This isn't good! Nashetania! Help her!" Dozzu yelled.

But Rolonia said, "I don't need it!"

For just an instant, her whole body turned red, and crimson mist spewed out through the gaps in her armor. Her Saint's blood was a fatal poison to every kind of fiend. The fiends around her screamed within the fog. She had thrown Fremy and Dozzu away because her attack would have felled them, too.

"Rolonia!" Fremy yelled.

But within the cloud of blood, Rolonia raised her hand to Fremy, telling her not to come help. Fremy realized what she wanted. She meant to ensure their escape alone.

Fremy wanted to help her but desperately resisted the urge. Revealing no

hesitation, she turned away and raced toward where the light had been. Dozzu and Nashetania had slipped out from the cloud of blood and the crowd of fiends, and they joined her.

“Ngh!”

After escaping the mass of fiends, the trio was only able to run for about a minute. The enemy had responded to the wolf-fiend’s call and was moving to surround them, pressing close from both sides to catch them in a pincer attack.

Nashetania kept them back with blades shooting up from the ground. “I’ll handle this.” She stopped and turned away from Fremy and Dozzu. The fiend seemed upset at this, but Nashetania smiled and said, “Don’t worry, Dozzu. I won’t be dying yet.” Then, with a swipe of her slim sword, she faced the fiends close on their tail. “Because I have Goldof on my side.”

Fremy kept sprinting toward her goal, and Dozzu, with more than a few backward glances, followed after her.

The fiends tightened their formation around Tgurneu to charge Chamo. Chamo’s slave-fiends were dispersed over a wide area, so the unit made a beeline for Chamo through the center of the line. The moment Adlet and Hans saw it happening, they sprang into action, running straight at Tgurneu and splitting up to either side in perfect coordination—Adlet to the right, Hans to the left. The few fiends on the flanks switched targets to the two men.

Adlet smiled. Just what he’d been hoping for.

Adlet ignored the attackers and ran backward. Grabbing onto a building to his side, he used the stakes hidden in his boots to run up the wall. The fiends crashed into it, and the building shuddered. Next, he threw the needles in both his hands at Hans’s opponents. Now that the attacking fiends were distracted by the needles from behind, Hans instantly slipped past them and went for Tgurneu at the center of the formation.

Tgurneu had been focusing on Chamo and was helpless to stop him. The slave-fiends were blocking the rest, so they couldn’t shift to protect Tgurneu.

“...Oh de—”

“Meow!”

Adlet's goal had been to feign a pincer attack as he analyzed the fiends, then back up Hans's attempt to kill Tgurneu. Hans had picked up on it without so much as a word exchanged between them.

Hans sliced off the dog-fiend's head with his sword. Headless, the creature thrust one forepaw into its stomach, ripped out the fig, and flung it into the air.

All the nearby fiends reached out for it. The slave-fiends launched an all-out assault then, holding back the underlings that tried to catch the fig and ripping up the body of the fallen dog-fiend.

Only one fiend escaped them, but Adlet threw his needles at it. The last-ditch effort was brought to a halt by a pain needle.

The fig hung in midair with no allies to catch it. Instantly, Hans's blade sliced the fruit to pieces.

"...Äh." One fiend cried witlessly. A heartbeat later, the rest began wailing and clutching their heads.

"Gyaaaaaaah!"

"Cóm...mander...Tgurneu... Cómmander Tgurneeeee!"

When they had all first entered the Howling Vilelands, Fremy had told her companions that fiends were connected with their commanders by a special bond. The moment Tgurneu died, the fact would be communicated to its whole army—and with such intensity that the confusion should turn them into a disorderly mob.

"...We won," said Hans.

Still clinging to the wall, Adlet watched—as Hans and Chamo let down their guards, certain of victory. "Dodge!" he yelled an instant too late. Some of the fiends had ceased their grief-stricken writhing and were coming up on Hans and Chamo from behind.

Hans reacted to the warning and flipped around, and Chamo's slave-fiends leaped out to protect her. Adlet threw every needle he had in an attempt to protect them.

"Meargh!"

But it all needed to happen a moment sooner. A fiend's horn pierced Hans's side, and another's claw ripped open Chamo's back. The wounds were deep—possibly fatal.

Adlet leaped from the wall, and the fiends attacked en masse to finish off Hans and Chamo. Adlet had no more tools left. There was no way for him to save them.

“Watch out!”

Then he noticed two figures rushing in. Lightning brought the fiends targeting Chamo to a halt while bullets tore through the one blocking Adlet. Adlet used that moment to scoop up Hans and escape the crowd of foes.

Fremy and Dozzu burst into the square, both covered in blood.

“Hans isn't our enemy! Don't attack him! You can't let him die!” Adlet yelled.

Fremy and Dozzu seemed confused. But seeing Hans a mess of wounds inflicted by fiends, they seemed to understand he'd been fighting with Adlet and Chamo against Tgurneu.

The arrival of reinforcements made the fiends pause to pull close together and strengthen their defenses.

Fremy raised her gun while sparks crackled off every hair of Dozzu's body. Cradling the motionless Hans, Adlet shifted behind them.

“...We will ask what happened later. Our priority is Tgurneu's defeat,” said Dozzu.

“Which one of them is it, Adlet?”

Adlet couldn't reply to Fremy's question. He couldn't believe what he'd just seen.

Just a moment ago, Tgurneu had been using the dog-fiend as its body. So the dog-fiend was either carrying Tgurneu's fig or hiding it within itself. Dozzu had said Tgurneu could only control one fiend at once, and its power was nullified at a distance greater than seven feet. The dog had to have been holding Tgurneu's fig, no question.

But the fig Hans had sliced up had been a dummy. Just a fig.

And the body of the dog-fiend had been trampled and savagely crushed by the slave-fiends. If Tgurneu's fig had been inside it, it would have been long dead, and no fiend had taken a fig from the host corpse. Adlet had made sure of that. So where was Tgurneu's real body?

When Adlet didn't reply, Fremy gave him a questioning look. Then a fiend called out to them with a smile—a rhinoceros-fiend that stood on two legs. "I'm over here! Fremy! Dozzu!" Adlet couldn't read the expression on the rhino's face, but the way it spread its forelegs was clearly happy.

"I'm glad you've come. My heart leaps to know that two such longtime acquaintances will be my opponents in the final battle. A grand last fight calls for an appropriate foe."

Fremy pointed her gun at the rhinoceros-fiend, but Adlet put his hand on the muzzle to stop her. "...That's not Tgurneu."

Fremy and Dozzu looked at Adlet.

"We got the wrong one. We still haven't found it."

So they figured me out, Tgurneu thought, but it couldn't compliment Adlet for being as sharp as ever. After this many clues, anyone should have been able to figure it out. Just as the boy had surmised, the rhino-fiend did not carry Tgurneu's real body.

Had Adlet and Hans not found it strange that Tgurneu hadn't run when Chamo arrived and threw that flash grenade? Obviously, this was because Tgurneu was certain it would never lose.

The moment Adlet saw Fremy, he wanted to thoughtlessly drop everything and embrace her. But they were in the middle of a deadly fight. He could hug her after Tgurneu was gone.

"Chamo...can you still fight?" Adlet asked. She nodded. A slug slave-fiend was doing some first aid on the gashes in her back with a tentacle, but most of her slave-fiends were starting to ooze back into mud form. She was only barely able to keep going.

"Protect Hans. And hold back the fiends coming from the outside."

“...Okay.”

Breathing and replying seemed painful for her. She just lay on the back of the slug-fiend, gasping. One slave-fiend swallowed the unconscious Hans while the rest spread outside the square in unison. Even wounded and exhausted, Chamo was still trying to fight.

“What do you mean? The rhino has to have Tgurneu’s real body. It’s not acting, like the wolf-fiend was. That’s the real one.” Dozzu sounded genuinely confused.

“I don’t have a perfect understanding of this either,” said Adlet. “But Tgurneu isn’t in there.”

With the rhino in their center, the fiends pressed toward them as a tight unit. The party was inching backward.

“We killed a different fiend before. It looked like Tgurneu was controlling it, but it wasn’t inside. I think the one that’s talking now might be the same. Tgurneu isn’t there.”

“That’s ridiculous. There’s no way Tgurneu’s ability could...” *could do that* , Dozzu must have been about to say before it shut its mouth. It must have realized it wasn’t aware of everything Tgurneu was capable of. “Then...where is Tgurneu?”

Adlet searched for the answer, but his head wouldn’t work right. Exhaustion and blood loss were wearing him down.

“What are you talking about, Adlet? I’m right here. This fiend has swallowed me,” Tgurneu taunted, and the fiends launched themselves forward. Fremy and Dozzu frantically kept them at bay, but with no tools left, Adlet couldn’t even defend himself properly.

“Adlet!”

“Watch out!”

Fremy and Dozzu both protected him. With their help, Adlet evaded the attacks, running this way and that. It didn’t seem Dozzu would use the stake Mora had given it—because there was no point. They were the ones who were

cornered now.

Think. Remember , Adlet told himself. He had been here with Tgurneu longest, so he was the only one capable of seeing the truth behind this ploy. There had to be a clue among everything Tgurneu had said and done—all the words and deeds of the other fiends in the battle. If they were trying to hide something, they were sure to let something slip somewhere.

“Ngh!” A cluster of fiends rushed at Adlet, and though he attempted to dash back to escape, he couldn’t shake them off. Dozzu tried covering him with a lightning strike, but one enemy shielded the others with its own body as they hounded Adlet.

“Pull yourself together!” Fremy threw a bomb with one hand as she fired with the other, and, finally, Adlet got away.

A number of strange things had happened, and Adlet hit on the greatest of the questions they raised: How could these fiends be so amazingly coordinated at all?

When they’d been fighting Hans and when the mouse-fiend had taken the fig from the dog-fiend, the majority of their comrades had moved as one. There had been no indication that they were taking orders from somewhere. They’d given no signs, exchanged no eye signals.

It was strange. While they were pretending to be in chaos after Tgurneu’s “death,” they’d circled around behind Hans and Chamo. Was it even possible for all the fiends to come up with such a complicated strategy together and carry it out at the same time?

But not all the fiends had been a part of that perfect coordination. The goat-fiend beside Tgurneu and the spider-fiend that had created the silk cocoon had acted based on their commander’s verbal orders, just like normal fiends.

What was different about the ones that could coordinate perfectly and the ones that didn’t?

“We haven’t...found Tgurneu? That’s impossible...it couldn’t be...,” Dozzu muttered. Its tiny body nimbly slipped among the fiends’ legs, but what it was doing was dangerous—practically a suicide attack.

“Stop it, Dozzu! That’s too risky!” Adlet yelled.

Dozzu didn’t listen. It made contact with the rhino-fiend and fried it with a point-blank, full-power lightning blast. It fell, but another fiend attacked Dozzu from the rear. “Wahh!”

It was a beetle-fiend with spikes all over its body. One pierced Dozzu. For such a tiny fiend, even one spike would do grave damage.

“Unfortunately, I’m over here. But you’re as weak as ever, Dozzu. You haven’t changed at all in the last two hundred years.” The beetle-fiend began speaking in Tgurneu’s tone.

“...It can’t be.”

Then Adlet arrived at a frightening possibility—one he didn’t want to think about. But it was the only possibility.

Tgurneu was controlling the majority of the fiends here.

Adlet had to have figured out the final secret that Tgurneu had been guarding. There was no need to hide it now. It could even tell them itself.

Of the fifty fiends Tgurneu commanded, forty were under its direct control. The only ones who weren’t were specialist number eleven, number seventeen (which had the healing ability), and the aerial messenger fiends—only the ones with special abilities necessary to carrying out Tgurneu’s plans.

Tgurneu had been preparing for the day of the final battle for a long time, and it had cultivated a fiend that would serve as its body for this fight—one that existed purely to be controlled by Tgurneu.

Specialist number one: Tgurneu’s ultimate weapon. It was a mixed-type fiend, multiple fiends fused into one to create something powerful. It was the same type as Tgurneu’s three-winged body, but what made it unique was that these forty fiends, fused together, moved as independent units.

Specialist number one was composed of a unit Tgurneu had designated as the supervisor and thirty-nine other dependent units. The dependent units moved according to the supervisor unit’s thoughts, and everything the supervisor saw and heard was transmitted to the dependent units. This enabled the forty

fiends to act as one.

The most important point was this: When the dependent units were not receiving any orders from the supervisor unit, they could make their own decisions. Units who couldn't move without being ordered to were useless, no matter how many there were. But specialist number one could act in perfect coordination or let units make their own choices. Tgurneu had made the perfect combat squad a reality.

Each individual unit was below average in strength, but Tgurneu made up for their weaknesses by lending them its own power. Tgurneu's main body was inside the stomach of the supervisor unit.

Tgurneu hadn't made specialist number one its ultimate weapon because it was convenient for hiding.

It was simply because it was strong.

"Fremy! Dozzu! Scatter!" Adlet yelled. While evading the fiends' attacks, he ran across the town square, away from the others. "Fremy! Put up a smoke screen! Dozzu, just keep moving! Shake them up!"

Having realized that the majority of the fiends in this square were being controlled by Tgurneu, there was just one thing Adlet could do: find the brain. And to do that, he had to figure out the nature of their enemy.

Fremy manifested a bomb in her hand, forming it in the shape of a stake. She tossed it at the ground, and it stabbed into the earth and exploded in a great cloud of dust. Dozzu ran into the smoke, slipping around the fiends' legs to fire off many small lightning bolts to disturb their formation. And as Adlet evaded the fiends, he observed them.

They were moving independently, after all, just like when he'd fought with Chamo's slave-fiends. They weren't just puppets following orders.

And though the fiends stuck in the smoke screen were losing sight of Dozzu, the fiends outside the dust cloud still had a lock on it. So the fiends couldn't share visual information with one another, it seemed. Even if one saw something, that information wasn't communicated to the others.

So then... , Adlet thought, scanning the horde. One would be acting as their

brain. That fiend would be watching over the whole battlefield to understand the combat situation and give instructions.

“...Keep going! Run all around, Dozzu! Blind them, Fremy!” Adlet yelled as he searched for a fiend that was acting unnaturally, one trying to observe everything and keep out of Fremy’s and Dozzu’s range of attack. That fiend would be the brain, and Tgurneu would most likely be inside it.

Jumping into the cloud of dust Fremy had provided, Adlet ran, avoiding the enemy’s eyes. If not for the blind, he wouldn’t have been able to evade them anymore. His whole body hurt. The nostrum from Piena he’d used to force his wounded body to keep moving had worn off. But still, he jumped into the smoke screen and evaded enemy detection.

Even if he did manage to find Tgurneu, what then? Could they defeat it with just Fremy and Dozzu? With all his tools gone, Adlet couldn’t even help.

I expected you’d do as well, Adlet. You’re making the correct move, Tgurneu said to itself. Adlet had accurately discerned specialist number one’s ability, and what’s more, he was taking logical steps to find out which was the supervisor unit.

But this was nothing Tgurneu hadn’t already anticipated.

Tgurneu had been practicing with specialist number one for the past hundred years. It had selected the most intelligent of its subordinates and made them fight it as it controlled number one. It had disclosed the absolute secret of number one’s ability and ordered them to try to figure out which fiend was the supervisor unit.

At first, Tgurneu’s opponents had been able to discover it immediately. Tgurneu would wind up revealing its identity in its behavior, whether it was being passive about attacking or surveying the area unnaturally.

But Tgurneu had practiced this way over and over—and it had been harsh. It had even sometimes ordered its subordinates to try with all their might to kill it. And at the end of all that long training, Tgurneu had learned how to fight using number one. It was able to make the supervisor unit under its control move exactly as the others did while still avoiding any fatal attacks from the enemy.

Tgurneu was proud. Now, no matter how long any battle went on, it would never give a single clue to its opponent—and its foe's attacks would never hit the supervisor unit, either. Tgurneu believed all its years of effort would never let it down. It was nothing if not a hard worker.

If the Braves of the Six Flowers had all come to Tgurneu fully prepared and all the dependent units were killed, then—even with number one's abilities—it would have been helpless. But number thirteen's poison had worn down their stamina, and with the help of its subordinates, Tgurneu had fended off half the Braves and prevented any concentrated assaults. So there was no way it could lose.

It was looking forward to this. Even though the Braves had come within inches of defeating Tgurneu, they would fail and retreat. The fiend was fighting for the opportunity to see Fremy's and Adlet's faces when it happened.

In Adlet's right hand was the sword he'd borrowed from Hans, and in his left was the Saint's Spike. With these in his grip, he watched the fiends carefully.

Why couldn't he find it? Not a single fiend betrayed any unusual behavior. None seemed likely to be the brain.

Fremy and Dozzu continued carrying out Adlet's instructions as the fiends focused their attacks on them. Chamo fought to prevent the stream of approaching enemies from getting into the square, believing that Adlet would find Tgurneu.

Right then—Dozzu was momentarily caught off guard among the fiends' legs, and a spike extended from one of the enemies to pierce its front leg.

"Dozzu!" Adlet regretted his instructions. He'd asked too much of Dozzu. No matter how fast the dog-fiend scampered around, it couldn't endure in the middle of the enemy's formation.

"Ugh...ngh..." Dozzu staggered along, unable to run anymore or charge the enemy. The most it could do was survive, keeping their foes in check with its lightning. "I-I'm...sorry..."

A cluster of fiends attacked Dozzu in its retreat while the rest went for Adlet and Fremy. Fremy was wounded all over, and Adlet—his condition went

without saying.

“Hey, Fremy. What are you fighting for?” One of the fiends attacking her asked. “For the world? For your allies? No. I know why. You’re fighting for Adlet.”

Next, another spoke in Tgurneu’s tone. “What a fool you are. There’s no meaning in believing in him and continuing to fight—because he doesn’t actually love you one bit.”

Yet another opened its mouth. “No, that’s not quite right. In his heart of hearts, he *despises* you.” They were all talking to Fremy. Biting her lip, she soldiered on.

“I’ll tell you the truth: Adlet is the seventh.”

“...Nonsense,” Fremy muttered with irritation, no longer ignoring them entirely. Adlet felt a chill run down his spine.

“Hans is a real Brave. He was trying to entrap Adlet, the seventh. Hans’s plan forced him to pretend to be a traitor. That’s all.

“I made the seventh to protect you, the Black Barrenbloom. And Adlet fulfilled that task for me wonderfully.”

Fremy looked at Adlet’s face—and her expression froze. From his reaction, she could tell Tgurneu wasn’t lying.

“I have the ability to control human love. And I used that ability to make Adlet love you. That’s why he’s been protecting you all this time.”

A swipe grazed Fremy’s shoulder—a blow she normally would have managed to block. She was rattled. Adlet tried telling her *That’s a lie* to quell her distress. But he was short of breath, and it hurt to stand. He couldn’t even yell anymore.

“Didn’t you think it was strange? Why would Adlet, who hates fiends, fall in love with you and you alone? Why would he forgive you so easily when you were an ally to me, the enemy of his village?”

“...You’re lying,” Fremy muttered.

“Surrender to me, Fremy. If you give in now, you’ll be welcomed back to the fold. This is the last time I will make this offer. If you refuse now, fiendkind will

never accept you again. What you're trying to protect here is an illusion. You're staking your life on a lie. What could possibly be a more foolish way to die?"

"Shut up! It's a lie! You must be lying!" Fremy screamed.

"In just a few minutes, you'll be yelling that you should have listened to what I said."

It was then that Adlet wondered *Why would Tgurneu say something like this?* But he already knew the reason. Tgurneu loved to see suffering. It had shown up two days ago to watch Goldof suffer, and earlier, it had deliberately weakened its power over Adlet's love so it could witness his torment. And now, it was telling Fremy the truth to see her suffering, too.

Then Adlet was struck with a flash of insight—he realized where Tgurneu was.

"Fine, believe for now that Adlet loves you. The stronger your faith, the more fun it will be for me. Your face when you realize the truth will be all the more wonderful."

"No. Adlet...Adlet really does—"

"Stop it, Tgurneu!" Adlet shouted. He gave his all to pretending he was still clueless. He couldn't have Tgurneu realizing that he knew where it was.

Tgurneu wasn't attacking Fremy and Adlet anymore. The area quieted a little, though he could still hear the assault of the fiends surrounding Dozzu and Chamo's dogged fight to keep the rest of the army at bay.

Am I positive I'm right? Adlet wondered. But they had no more time left for hesitation.

"Stop what? You mean telling her the truth? Or controlling your love?"

"...Don't...hurt her...anymore." As Adlet spoke, he examined the fiends. Their tight formation showed no weaknesses, no opening for Adlet to cut through. Even knowing where Tgurneu was, he had no weapons that would reach it.

Even if he told his allies which one was Tgurneu, they still couldn't win. Exhausted as they were, they couldn't make it beyond the defensive line that protected the fiend commander.

In order to win, they had to catch it off guard. They had to make Tgurneu

careless, then get close enough during that brief opportunity to kill it.

“Fremy...Tgurneu is...controlling me. It’s making me love you,” Adlet confessed.

Fremy’s face froze. The fiends facing them all smiled in unison.

“...All this time, everything I’ve said has been a lie. I said I’m a hero who would save the world. I said I loved you from the bottom of my heart. I said I was the strongest man in the world. All of it...all of it was lies.”

“Adlet...”

The fiends were grinning gleefully. *I’ve got this*, Adlet thought. But he knew his best chance would come when Tgurneu was certain of its victory. “But... Fremy, I...” Staggering, he approached her. “I’ve always turned lies into truth!”

That remark stunned the group of fiends a bit. Adlet had been waiting for that opportunity. Mustering all his remaining strength, he charged at them. They leaped for him all at once, but their moment of surprise had given Adlet the time he needed to avoid them.

He ran into the crowd as they attacked him from every side. It was a reckless charge, but Adlet believed in Fremy. Even if he didn’t say a word, even if he gave no signal, she was sure to back him up.

Her bullets and bombs blew the fiends backward, and the wind of the blast pushed him forward.

“I’m gonna make you happy!” Adlet dashed in—toward one fiend at the center of the group, one with a beautiful bird face and a two-legged body.

Adlet remembered that fiend. Less than an hour ago, when he had given up on everything and crumbled before Tgurneu, it had been among the ten forming the circle around him. And the moment he had yielded, it had been with the mouse-fiend speaking to him. The bird-fiend had moved from behind it, squarely in front of Adlet.

The few dozen fiends Tgurneu controlled couldn’t share visual information; Tgurneu couldn’t know what the other fiends saw. In order to see the moment when Adlet gave in, Tgurneu had been forced to personally circle around in

front of him.

It had been just one step—but that one step would invite Tgurneu's downfall.

"Forget it!" Some of the fiends had withstood Fremy's blast and set on Adlet. He couldn't dodge, but if he backed away now, he would let Tgurneu escape. Adlet bore the hits on his armor and took another step forward.

"Adlet!" Though still under fire, Dozzu fired off a lightning strike to assist him. Chamo's slave-fiends rushed into the square as well, spitting acid at the enemy formation. The final fiend in front of the bird, Fremy shot through with a bullet.

"...Ridiculous." The bird-fiend's eyes widened.

With a roar, Adlet thrust the spike forward with all his might.

For an instant, Tgurneu was stunned. Adlet had discovered where it was. But the Braves were already exhausted. Even if they had solved the mystery, that was no reason for it to lose.

"Haaa!" When Adlet lunged out to attack, Tgurneu didn't block it. Its body was sturdy enough for something so minor. Adlet stabbed into number one's supervisor unit, but he couldn't fully penetrate its firm hide.

Tgurneu thrust out with a sharp hand that skimmed Adlet. The boy's sword was still stuck in Tgurneu's host body and was pulled out of his grip. In his other hand, Adlet held the Saint's Spike, his ultimate weapon. Tgurneu knew that weapon wouldn't work on it but nevertheless dodged the swing and knocked the weapon aside with a knee strike.

Now Adlet was empty-handed. Tgurneu's third attack was another stab from its pointed hand into Adlet's stomach. It felt the blow hit Adlet's organs. "I won't kill..." *I won't kill you*, Tgurneu started to say. But a heartbeat later, still impaled, Adlet grabbed Tgurneu by the face and held its beak open with a finger.

Tgurneu couldn't understand what he was trying to do. It tried to shake the boy off, to shove him away.

Adlet took a deep breath, and then, in one burst, spat out all the blood pooled in his mouth. The fluid shot into the unit's mouth, pouring down into its

stomach. When Adlet's blood touched the fig at the bottom, Tgurneu's real body, utter agony overwhelmed it.

Tgurneu's frame writhed inside the unit's stomach, losing control of number one. As one that had never fought with its own body, it was unused to pain.

Four years earlier, Atreau had given Adlet the order to find a use for the Saint's Spike, and Adlet had stabbed himself in the heart. A few hours later, Atreau was treating the injury.

"I ask you: What was the reason for this foolishness?" Atreau asked Adlet as he lay in bed.

"You get why, don't you? Didn't you examine my blood?" Adlet replied with a smile. "You told me that a Saint's Spike is a crystallized version of the poison extracted from a Saint's blood. So I thought if I melted that crystal into my own blood, maybe I could turn my whole body into poison."

Atreau was exasperated but surprised at the same time. Judging from his attitude, Adlet was convinced of his success. "I'd bet it's more effective than you predicted. Your blood's a poison even more effective than a Saint's. If a fiend drank that, it'd probably die in a matter of minutes. Just touching it would introduce it to some serious pain." Atreau turned his back to Adlet. "But it's a foolish idea. What need is there to turn your own blood into a weapon? There's no value in recording it in my research. But...I'll let you stay as my apprentice."

Adlet made a fist and thrust it up at the ceiling.

Fiends' cries rose up from the square. The bird-fiend that had pierced Adlet's torso with its hand twisted in anguish. Adlet was relieved his final move had worked. If it hadn't, it would have been over for him.

Tgurneu hadn't noticed that, under the veil of smoke, Adlet had broken off the tip of the Saint's Spike and buried it in the stomach wound Tgurneu itself had given him.

"It's not yet over, Adlet!" Dozzu yelled, and as it cried, all the fiends turned on Adlet. But they now lacked the breathtaking coordination of just moments ago. They were confused, unable to grasp the situation or make sensible judgments.

Fremy took advantage of that opportunity to blow off the bird-fiend's head

with a bullet. Her second bullet pierced its stomach.

Instantly, all the fiends around it froze and fell to the ground as one.

“Finish it off!” Fremy yelled, about to fire off a third bullet into the corpse of the bird-fiend.

But before she could, a fig jumped out from the bird’s smashed head. “Wahhhhhh!” It opened its mouth wide and screeched. “It h-hurts! Ah! Ahh! What is this?! It h-hurts! Save me! Fiends! Save me!” With the vines that grew from its leafy top, Tgurneu rolled along the ground.

So this was Tgurneu. For a moment, Adlet forgot about the fight and just watched. This was the creature that had controlled everything about him—had destroyed everything about him.

Seeing the real Tgurneu for the first time up close, it looked so weak and pitiful.

“Adlet! Capture it!” Fremy yelled.

Tgurneu didn’t know what had happened. It could have sworn victory was right in front of it just ten seconds earlier. And now, its defenseless real body had been exposed as it twisted in agony. “Hyaaaaa!” it screamed, panicked. It had never once had its powerless fig form exposed before an enemy.

Its vines carried it out of Adlet’s grasp, and its fruit dodged Fremy’s bullets. Tgurneu dashed out of the square at full speed.

Number one may have been defeated, but Tgurneu still had plenty of other minions. If it could jump into one of their mouths to control them, it would be saved. All that filled its head now were thoughts of survival.

Number twenty-four and the spider-fiend ran toward Tgurneu in an attempt to save their commander, but slave-fiends reached them from behind and slayed them in the blink of an eye.

“Cómmander Tgurneu! This way!” One fiend slipped through the slave-fiend’s defenses and came running toward Tgurneu. But the moment the fig was in its grasp, Dozzu fired off a lightning bolt, and it fell before the commander could seize control. Tgurneu continued its flight, dragging along its burnt and charred

body.

“Tch!” One of Fremy’s bombs rolled close by. Tgurneu used its vines to leap wide and avoid the blast, but the force of it pushed it away from freedom and back into the center of the square.

“Save me! Save me! Save me!” Tgurneu screeched, again and again. But no fiends could reply. None broke through the slave-fiend’s defenses.

Staggering, Tgurneu’s gaze turned toward Dozzu’s glare. “Save me...Dozzu... We’re...friends...”

“I’ll say this once more: I consider it the greatest shame of my life that I ever called you a friend.” Dozzu unleashed a lightning strike. Tgurneu was certain it would die. But Dozzu, wounded and exhausted, missed. It merely fried most of Tgurneu’s vines, leaving only one.

I’m going to lose? Tgurneu thought. But what on earth had been the cause of its defeat?

It should have won this fight. There was no reason for it to lose. But it had. Tgurneu was forced to admit it was a miracle.

And Tgurneu knew that love, only love, could cause miracles.

It was going to lose. Tgurneu. To Adlet. To Fremy—and to the power of love that supported them.

“...Ah...ahhhhh!” Tgurneu screamed, swinging its lone vine around. It was going to be defeated by the power of love. That was the one thing it could never allow to happen. This was more difficult to bear than death.

More than anyone, Tgurneu believed in the power of love—and hated it in kind.

“No! No, no!” Tgurneu lived to crush love. To use love. It had to. If it was to be defeated by that power, all meaning would evaporate from the life it had lived so far. Flailing its vine in the pointlessness of it all, Tgurneu screamed and screamed.

Then, a hand reached out to it. “...Got you.” Adlet grabbed Tgurneu the fig.

Panting hard, Adlet held Tgurneu in his hands. *Once I crush this fruit, it’ll all be*

over , he thought, but for some reason, his fingers didn't move.

His vision was clouding, and his legs felt weak—so weak, it was strange he was still standing.

“What are you doing, Adlet?! Hurry up and kill it! Rolonia and Mora are in danger!” Fremy had her hands full dealing with the fiends charging into the square, while Dozzu's legs were also trembling as it held its ground, firing bolt after bolt.

Tgurneu still in his grasp, Adlet stood frozen. He wondered if maybe the fiend was still plotting something. Maybe it had some other trick up its sleeve.

But Tgurneu just kept flailing its vine in vain. It really was out of options.

For some reason, Adlet was sad to see that this creature, who had destroyed his whole life, was so insubstantial.

Years ago, he had made up his mind that when he got his revenge, he would get it over with at once. He didn't need Tgurneu begging for its life or repenting. He'd decided he would just end it. But that determination had been shattered. There was something he just had to say to it, no matter what. “Tgurneu, you called me your toy. You said I existed for your sake. But actually, it was the other way around.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“You were there for mine. You were there to bring Fremy and me together.”

For a while, Tgurneu was silent. Suddenly, its one remaining vine shot out over thirty feet, and its tip pierced the body of a fiend.

You're wrong, Adlet. My life has not been lived for your sake , Tgurneu thought. The power of love hasn't defeated me. Even if I die, I'll keep destroying love and making those who feel it suffer.

And as long as I'm still fighting, I'll never be the loser.

Adlet. Fremy. I will be crushing your love until the end.

“[I'll tell you one last thing, Fremy!]” Tgurneu cried. Adlet looked at the tip of its vine, stuck into the chest of the mouse-fiend. He recalled that the mouse had been carrying the Book of Truth, which meant Tgurneu was using its spell on

itself. The limited number of uses had been a lie.

“[Your mother really did love you!]” it yelled.

The moment Fremy heard that, she froze stiff.

Something told Adlet that he couldn't let Tgurneu keep talking. His fingers dug into Tgurneu's soft body.

“[And Adlet...]” As Tgurneu started to continue, Adlet crushed it.

He felt two lumps in his fingers. One was the tiniest fiend core he had ever seen. And the other was a red gem.

It was in that instant that Adlet's vision began to spin, though not because of his wounds. It was an uncanny sensation, one he'd never felt before—the feeling that he wasn't going to be himself anymore. Something was falling out from inside his head. There was no time for him to bask in the joy of fulfilling his revenge. It was all he could do to withstand the surreal experience. He felt ready to collapse, but he still didn't let go of Tgurneu's body. He had to destroy the core in his grasp, or he wouldn't have truly killed it.

The moment Adlet was about to shatter the core, Tgurneu's half-crushed mouth moved. In a quiet voice only Adlet could hear, it said something.

As the words reached Adlet's ears, he broke Tgurneu's core. Then he collapsed, unconscious.

The very instant Tgurneu died, the crest on Fremy's left hand shone, and the brightness split into six bullets of light that flew away.

One went to Chamo's thigh, and one jumped into the body of the slave-fiend that had swallowed Hans. Three of the rest flew off to the northwest to hit Goldof, Mora, and Rolonia's crests before disappearing. A light bullet also went to strike Nashetania's crest. The power of the Black Barrenbloom, the heroform stealing power from the Crests of the Six Flowers, had been nullified by Tgurneu's death.

A scream echoed throughout the whole ruins. The fiends lost their minds, wailing over the unthinkable that had happened. All command structure evaporated, and the fiends immediately fell into confusion. Their reactions

varied. Some tried to save their dead commander. Some tried to escape from the blazing forest. Some tried to kill the Braves. Some stopped where they were and wailed. And many simply stood there, not knowing what to do.

“...Rolonia.”

She was awoken by a voice.

After Rolonia had helped the others escape, she'd kept on fighting. Her memory was blank after a certain point. She didn't even know how long she'd kept going.

She'd thought she was dead. That move where she sprayed blood from her entire body was practically a suicide attack. She shouldn't have been able to fight anymore after using it. Though she was the Saint of Blood, losing so much of it would disable anyone, including her. There had been over a hundred fiends against one exhausted Rolonia. Even a child could understand what should have happened then. And Rolonia had felt at peace with that.

“...We...won,” someone said, and Rolonia opened her eyes.

She was lying on the same battlefield she'd been on when she'd lost consciousness. But there was one big difference: The fiends had all forgotten to attack her and were just standing there.

Beside her was Goldof. He was carrying both Mora and Nashetania and holding his spear in one hand. He knelt over the fallen Rolonia, protecting her from any attacks. “That was...close. You...managed to...survive,” he said, smiling.

“Adlet!”

Tgurneu was dead, but Fremy couldn't waste time processing emotions about it just then.

Too many things had happened. Tgurneu had told her Adlet was the seventh—and that Hans was a real Brave. According to Tgurneu, it had been making Adlet love her and had also used the power of the Saint of Words to talk about her mother.

In her confusion, the first place she rushed was to the fallen Adlet's side.

“...Ah!” She touched his body to treat him, but when her fingers brushed against Adlet’s blood, they stung with pain. She couldn’t heal him like this.

Dozzu came limping up to them, dragging one leg. “Fremy, Chamo, let’s leave this place as soon as possible. Please hurry.”

Fremy was confused, not understanding the reason for Dozzu’s haste.

“Cargikk will be moving into action. Tgurneu has been keeping him in check so far, but now that he is free to act, we will be targeted. We have to find somewhere safe, or we’ll all die.” Dozzu spoke with urgency. It was more afraid now than it had been during the fight with Tgurneu, when all had seemed lost.

Fremy took off her cloak and wrapped it around Adlet, lifted him over her shoulders, and shot a glance at Chamo. “First, we’ll meet up with Rolonia and Nashetania, then with Mora and Goldof. Follow me, Chamo.”



When Fremy started off, Dozzu called after her. “Um...could you please carry me, too? I can’t run.”

One of Chamo’s slave-fiends bit Dozzu on the scruff of its neck and lifted it up. Following Fremy, they all headed northwest.

On Fremy’s back, Adlet regained consciousness for just a moment.

The world was spinning. Something was churning around in his head. Everything he’d ever experienced was whirling around inside it, his memories were confused, and it felt like his brain was being shredded. He was suffering from a fear he’d never experienced before.

Unable to bear it, he passed out again.

“...Urk,” Adlet moaned quietly. Something was calling him awake.

“How many times does Chamo hafta tell you?!”

It seemed her rebuke had awoken him. He didn’t know how much time had passed since he’d collapsed.

“Chamo, please...a little quieter.” The next voice Adlet heard was Dozzu’s.

When Adlet opened his eyes, he saw the ceiling of a dark cave. Looking toward its entrance, the light of high noon hit his eyes. He squinted at the brightness.

“The proof is all there! Chamo is *telling* you, Adlet framed the catboy. We read all the hieroglyphs written on that gem. The Barrenbloom didn’t have any transfer power. He was lying about that.” Chamo stood in the center of the cave as she shouted to Rolonia, Mora, Nashetania, and Goldof, who were all sitting together.

“B-but Hans almost killed you...,” Rolonia said, confused. The other Braves and Nashetania also appeared perplexed.

“Chamo’s told you guys over and over. The catboy isn’t the seventh. He was just pretending to be to lure Adlet out and trap Tgurneu.”

Dozzu was curled up behind Chamo. Hans was lying in the back of the cave, apparently still asleep. Fremy was beside Adlet, holding her knees.

“But, Chamo,” said Mora. “Didn’t you say yourself that Adlet was the one who killed Tgurneu in the end? Why would the seventh do that?”

“Chamo doesn’t know, either. But then lemme ask you: Why was the catboy fighting Tgurneu?”

“Well...uh...” Mora faltered.

Then Fremy quietly asked, “Adlet...are you awake?” Her voice sounded frail.

Still lying down, Adlet gave a small nod.

“It’s noon now,” she told him. “It’s been about five hours since Tgurneu’s death. We’re on the eastern side of the Fainting Mountains—quite far from the original meet-up point we arranged.

“Cargikk’s subordinates were lying in wait at the Bud of Eternity, and given our wounds, we had no choice but to run. It took us hours, but we finally found a safe place.”

“...I...see.”

Chamo approached where Adlet lay and glared down at him hostilely. “You’re gonna confess everything.”

He had no intention of hiding anything. There was no reason for him to. So he told them everything—how he’d ordered the white lizard to protect Fremy back at the temple, how he’d heard a voice that sounded like the Saint of the Single Flower coming from his crest, how Tgurneu had informed him that it had taken Fremy hostage, how Hans had trapped him, and how Tgurneu had surrounded them.

And how he had exposed their plan to protect Fremy.

The allies were all speechless as they listened to his tale. Even after he finished explaining everything, they didn’t open their mouths for a long time.

“...Is that...true?” Chamo finally asked.

“The hieroform Tgurneu had...the Book of Truth. Use that. Then...you’ll know everything.”

“We brought it with us, but it’s a no go. Only Tgurneu can use it.”

“Oh...but trust me. It’s all true.”

Again, they were all struck dumb.

That was no surprise. Mora and Rolonia had firmly believed all this time that Adlet wasn’t the seventh.

“So I gambled on the wrong man,” said Nashetania. “I’d made up my mind to bet everything on the hope that you were a real Brave.” She was pale. Dozzu looked at her with some reproach. Goldof also seemed confused by this revelation.

“I...” Adlet’s gaze turned to Fremy. She was staring at his face without saying a word. On the surface, she didn’t seem upset, but beside her, Adlet could tell—she was trembling slightly.

“I...”

He couldn’t believe it.

Fremy had been his every reason for living. Every reason for him to fight. He’d betrayed the Braves for her, stood up for her, killed Tgurneu for her. He’d sworn he was going to make her happy, just five hours ago. And it felt like moments ago.

But despite it, he felt no love for her at all.

“...Fremy,” he muttered. He thought that maybe saying something would change his frozen heart. But nothing changed.

To Adlet, the one who sat beside him now was nothing. Nothing more than a girl.

“Fremy.” He said her name one more time and looked at her face. But nothing stirred in his heart.

He didn’t understand it. Why had he wanted to destroy the world for this girl? Why had he ever felt the desire to defeat this enemy for her? He tried recapturing the feelings he’d had before. He fought to remember loving Fremy. But he just couldn’t. He felt empty, as if a dry wind were blowing through him. There was a sense of loss, as if something important was gone forever. It was a sadness he’d never experienced—not of losing someone important, but of

losing the importance of her.

“...So what do we do with him? Kill him? Or cripple him so he can’t fight?” Chamo suggested. Adlet looked at her face with surprise.

“Adlet should no longer be any harm. Tgurneu was controlling him, and it’s dead. Adlet himself had no desire to fight the Braves. So we should treat him as an ally, as we have thus far,” said Mora.

“I believe we have yet to acquire proof that he was never Tgurneu’s ally in the first place. We don’t know he was forced to love Fremy,” Nashetania countered. Her voice was terribly cold.

“It would be...a bad idea to kill him. But I’m not sure...if we can trust him...from now on...” Goldof was also cautious about Adlet.

“...*Hrmeow* . Adlet’s harmless *neow* . No need to kill him,” Hans said, now awake.

“You’re too nice, catboy. He just about killed all of us,” Chamo snapped.

Rolonia argued, “N-no, we can’t. I mean, Addy saved the world, didn’t he?!”

“...What?” Chamo shot back.

“I mean, he defeated Tgurneu! Without him, we all would have died! We can’t kill the one who just saved us!”

“No!” Adlet yelled. Rolonia jumped a little. “If I hadn’t been there, you all coulda killed the Black Barrenbloom at the Temple of Fate. Getting rid of Tgurneu would’ve been way easier. None of you would have been in so much danger.”

“B-but...”

“Tgurneu said no other seventh could’ve kept Fremy safe. And I think that’s true. If I hadn’t been there, or if I had been weaker, the Braves would have been able to...kill her.”

Fremy’s eyes widened. *Would have been able to kill her*. She must have been surprised to hear the phrase from Adlet’s mouth.

“You should’ve let her die. That would’ve ruined all Tgurneu’s plans.”

Fremy's lips trembled as she looked at Adlet. She must have realized how he felt now. She lowered her eyes sadly.

"It's... It's not your fault, Addy," Rolonia said, her expression heartbroken.

Why did it end up like this? Adlet wondered as he looked at the ceiling of the cave. He wanted to love Fremy. He wanted to fight for her. But he was positive; he couldn't anymore. "...Why?"

Fremy was an ally he'd fought together with for some time. She'd saved him in the Phantasmal Barrier. She'd always been concerned about him. In the Temple of Fate, she'd asked him to save her. Wounded and in pain, she had clung to him. She'd kept fighting for him.

So why couldn't he love her, even a little? He didn't understand it.

"There's no meaning in believing in him and continuing to fight—because he doesn't actually love you one bit." Tgurneu's words passed through Adlet's mind, but he rejected them. He believed he had to love Fremy, even if Tgurneu wasn't controlling him. He didn't want to acknowledge the fiend had been right. He didn't want to believe he could be so heartless.

But he couldn't love her. As he spent more time awake, he even began gradually forgetting what it had felt like to love someone. He could tell without a shadow of a doubt that he wasn't the same person he'd been before.

Lying here was someone completely different.

Who am I? Just who is the man I am now?

"...Fremy," he muttered.

Something was gradually blazing up in his heart—the revenge that had once been a raging fire within him. The flames of his desire for revenge had burned and burned within him since the destruction of his village eight years earlier, and even after Tgurneu's death, they were still ablaze.

Once, Adlet had sworn to abandon everything for the sake of his revenge—he'd sworn he didn't need a human heart. He would abandon love, joy, and everything else and fill his heart with hate alone. He had sworn to become a tool that lived just to fight and avenge. He had sworn he would never, ever stop

fighting—not until he had killed all the fiends that had destroyed his village and any of their accomplices.

Have I done that? Have I fulfilled my revenge? Adlet asked himself.

No. And he could say that for certain. The fires of his desire for vengeance had not abated in the slightest.

Fremy. There was still her. If only she had never existed, this wouldn't have happened.

Adlet's village had been destroyed to make him the seventh—to make him protect Fremy. If she had never existed, his village wouldn't have been destroyed. Rainer wouldn't have died. His life wouldn't have been shattered.

Tgurneu had made Fremy suffer, too. Just like Adlet, she was a victim, robbed of everything by that fiend. But Adlet kicked those thoughts away. So she hadn't known—so what? It didn't change the fact that if Fremy had never existed, Adlet wouldn't have had to lose it all.

He also considered her feelings for him, but he discarded those thoughts, too. Even if she did care for him, so what? Would that change that his village was gone or that everyone was dead?

Worst of all, there were Tgurneu's final words. Right before Adlet had crushed Tgurneu in his palm, Tgurneu had used the Book of Truth to say:

"[Fremy killed your sister, Schetra.]"

Rolonia was still addressing the group. "We don't have to kill him. We can't lay the blame on his shoulders. Everything was Tgurneu's fault, and it's dead now. Can't we just let it end there?" The others still acted wary of Adlet, but Rolonia continued pushing back. "Right, Addy? We're going to protect the world together, right? You're one of us now. We'll work together to fight the Evil God and Cargikk. Right?"

Adlet was unable to reply.

Rolonia turned around to look at him. "Say something, Addy... Addy?" She seemed puzzled. She peered into his face for a long time. And then, so quietly it could hardly be heard, she murmured, "...Are you really Addy?"

Tgurneu had known everything: what would happen to Adlet after he was released from the manipulation of his love—and just how his heart would change. Tgurneu knew who Adlet had once been. His heart had been closed, his soul obsessed with the past, burning with the dark lust for revenge.

He'd loved no one, befriended no one, and only hate had filled his heart.

Tgurneu had changed him, given him the ability to love again. It had made him slowly remember kindness—the desire to protect. When Tgurneu died, Adlet would go back to the boy who'd lost all love in his heart and everything other than hate.

Before its final breath, Tgurneu had thought, *I'm not the loser here, Fremy, Adlet. I'm going to crush your love. I will continue to bring you suffering—forever.*

Fremy, Adlet is sure to try to kill you eventually. The person who loved you with all his heart will now loathe you. The person who swore to protect you will be the one to kill you.

I've decided to imagine your expression as I die.

I'm very satisfied, Fremy. I feel truly glad I was able to send you out into the world—because simply imagining your faces as you suffer in love, I am overjoyed.

Epilogue
Those Freed

Epilogue

Those Freed

A fiend walked around the razed forest. It was a lion-fiend with a crude sword in one hand: Cargikk, one of the commanders, the one who led 60 percent of all fiends. No retinue accompanied it. It strode the battlefield alone.

Already, signs of any living fiend had entirely vanished. All that remained were charred corpses and the bodies of those slain by the Braves and Dozzu and Nashetania. Having lost their commander, Tgurneu's subordinate fiends had all scattered and fled.

"...This is horrible," said Cargikk. "...Too horrible."

Cargikk's knees crumbled. Its obsidian sword fell to the ground. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry...my comrades... I...should have..."

When both its fists slammed the ground, a thunderous rumble reverberated around the area. A sound like a tiny cough choked out of its throat.

Cargikk sobbed. Apologizing to the dead fiends over and over, it wept voicelessly.

The great space, about a hundred yards squared, was so quiet it was painful. In this stone room, in the lowest part of the Temple of Fate, the Saint of the Single Flower sat quietly. Her whole body bound in chains, clad in the fashionable dress Tgurneu had put on her, with the flower crown on her head, she simply sat.

Then suddenly, the flower crown swayed and fell to the ground.

The chains binding this mummy of a Saint slowly began to shake. Though no one had laid a single finger on her, they came undone. Eventually, they all fell to the ground, and her body vanished like an illusion.

Then, an instant later, her body was lying on the roof of the Temple of Fate. Her shriveled form did not move so much a finger.

A bird-fiend flew down from the sky as if controlled by something. It eased the Saint of the Single Flower onto its back, then cautiously flew into the sky,

heading westward.

The Weeping Hearth. At some point, that name had been given to the furthest tip of the Howling Vilelands, where the Evil God had been sealed away. They said it had been so named because the Saint of the Single Flower had covered her face and broken down in tears after she defeated the Evil God. Why had the Saint wept after her victory? There were no texts remaining in the present day that recorded the reason.

The fiend with the Saint of the Single Flower on its back soared over the defensive wall that Cargikk had built, descending easily to the blackish-red earth below. In the center of the Weeping Hearth, now the Land of Death where the Evil God slept, the bird-fiend landed and lowered the Saint to the ground.

The ugly lump of mud known as the Evil God extended a tentacle. It grabbed the bird-fiend, twisted its body, and pulled the creature into its own mass.

“Oh, Maon.” A pair of captivating woman’s lips rose from the surface of the lump of mud. They spoke in a voice overcome with emotion. “I wanted to see you. I wanted to see you, Maon.” The Evil God’s tentacles reached out to the body of the Saint on the ground and lifted her up as if cradling a baby. “It’s been so hard, Maon. I couldn’t see you for a thousand years—even though you had always, always been by my side.”

Then, one of the desiccated Saint’s fingers moved. Gently, it stroked the tentacle that supported her body. Tears dripped in an unbroken stream from her eyes, even though no moisture should have remained within her. The mummified Saint of the Single Flower cried without a sound.

“You don’t have to say a word. I know everything—just how hard you worked for me, Maon, and just how many painful days you overcame for me.” As the Evil God spoke, its tentacles brought the Saint’s body close to the ball of mud. “You don’t have to worry about anything. Adlet Mayer will come soon. And he’ll be bringing the seventh crest that was made for me.”

The Saint’s body touched the mud. The shriveled mummy of a woman was quietly swallowed by the body of the Evil God.

“Wait, Maon. And be at ease. Soon, Adlet will come save me.”

The body of the Saint of the Single Flower disappeared into the Evil God.



It's been a long time. This is Ishio Yamagata. I've brought you Volume 6 of *Rokka: Braves of the Six Flowers*.

I hope you enjoyed it.

The *Rokka* series is going to be made into an anime now. By the time this book is out (in Japanese), the show will already have begun airing.

All my readers who have seen it: Are you enjoying it? Those who have yet to see it and those who didn't know it's been made into an anime: I would love it if you would please watch it. The entire staff has worked on it with a lot of passion and respect for the books. As the author, I'm as thankful as I can be. I think it's sure to be an anime all my readers can enjoy.

Please do check it out.

The other day, I was allowed to witness the post-recording. It was the second time that I've participated in process, since *Tatakau Shisho* was made into an anime, but I just can't get used to it. For some reason, it's extremely embarrassing for me to listen to someone read a text that I've written. Am I the only one who feels that way?

Normally, I hardly watch any anime, so I'm basically completely ignorant when it comes to performing arts and the production of visual media. They asked me for my opinion a number of times during the recording, but I was always flustered and couldn't give them much in the way of ideas. I basically just turned into a decoration that just sat there. I'm sorry I couldn't be useful.

But the anime staff overcame the handicap of the original author's uselessness and made a wonderful anime. I would like to take this opportunity

to once again express my thanks. Thank you so very much.

Changing the subject: In February of this year, they had an art exhibition called *Japanese Art: Selected Creators from All Over Japan* at the Ueno Royal Museum. The exhibit gathered art from creators in various different fields in a single venue. Miyagi-san, who does illustrations for this series, also submitted a piece to it: the picture of Fremy that's on the cover of the first volume of the *Rokka* series.

I see Fremy's face practically every day, but seeing her framed in an art museum made her seem different than usual. So refined. I couldn't look away for a while.

There was a lot of other wonderful art on display there besides Miyagi-san's illustrations, and I forgot the time enjoying them.

And now, a report on my current state of affairs: I don't even know when this happened, but now I have over thirty books that I've bought and just left unread. Generally, when I buy novels or manga, I read them, but I often have how-to books or new books that end up on the unread stack. With some of these, I can't even remember what I was thinking when I bought them, and some I don't remember buying at all.

I have two books about rehabilitation methods for overcoming a gambling addiction and how to join a support group for compulsive gamblers to help one another. I never gamble at all myself, and I have no plans to write about gambling, though. I also have a book by the fortune-teller Kazuko Hosoki-san and another book about her. Was I ever a fan? I have no recollection.

I have about three books about psychology. I do have some inkling as to why I bought these. When I picked them up, I must have been thinking I'd be able to write a good novel if I learned about human psychology. However, I haven't even opened any of these since buying them.

These wonderful books were supposed to help people and be enjoyed. What quirk of fate has led them to my bookshelf? Seeing the stacks makes me a little sad. Is there no book out there that teaches you how to efficiently absorb the ones you don't feel like reading or how to not buy books you don't need?

And finally, the acknowledgments.

To my illustrator, Miyagi-san: Thank you for your gorgeous work. And also, I don't even have the words to thank you for all the many times you've helped me so much in my writing.

To my editor, T-san, and everyone in the editorial department, the proofreading staff, and those involved in the production of this book: *Rokka* exists because of all your help.

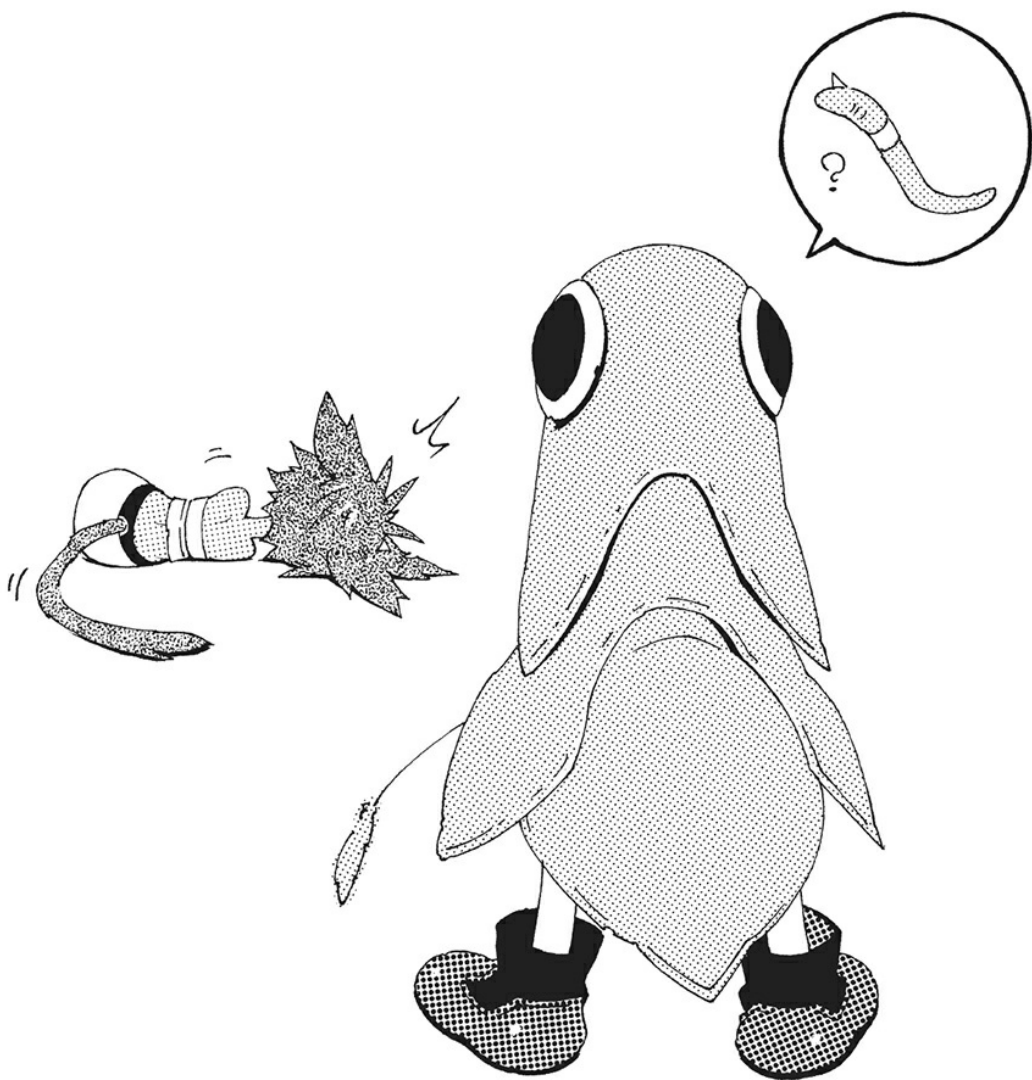
To Kei Toru-san, who wrote the manga, and all the staff who worked on it: Thank you very much for producing such a wonderful comic.

And all the staff of the anime: Thank you so much for your work now and in the future.

And to all my readers: Let us meet again in the next book.

See you.

ISHIO YAMAGATA

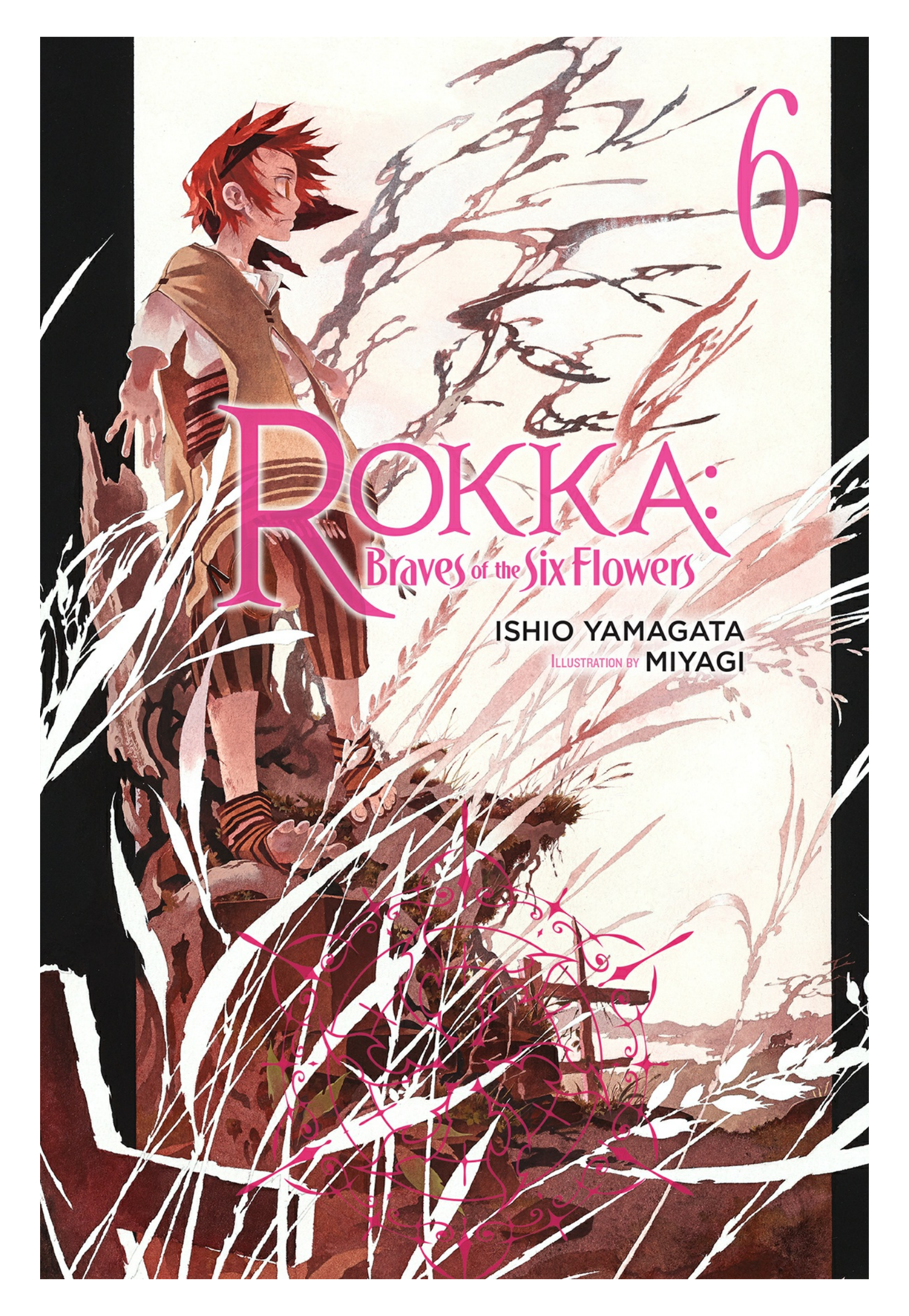


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6

ROKKA:

Braves of the Six Flowers

ISHIO YAMAGATA

ILLUSTRATION BY MIYAGI